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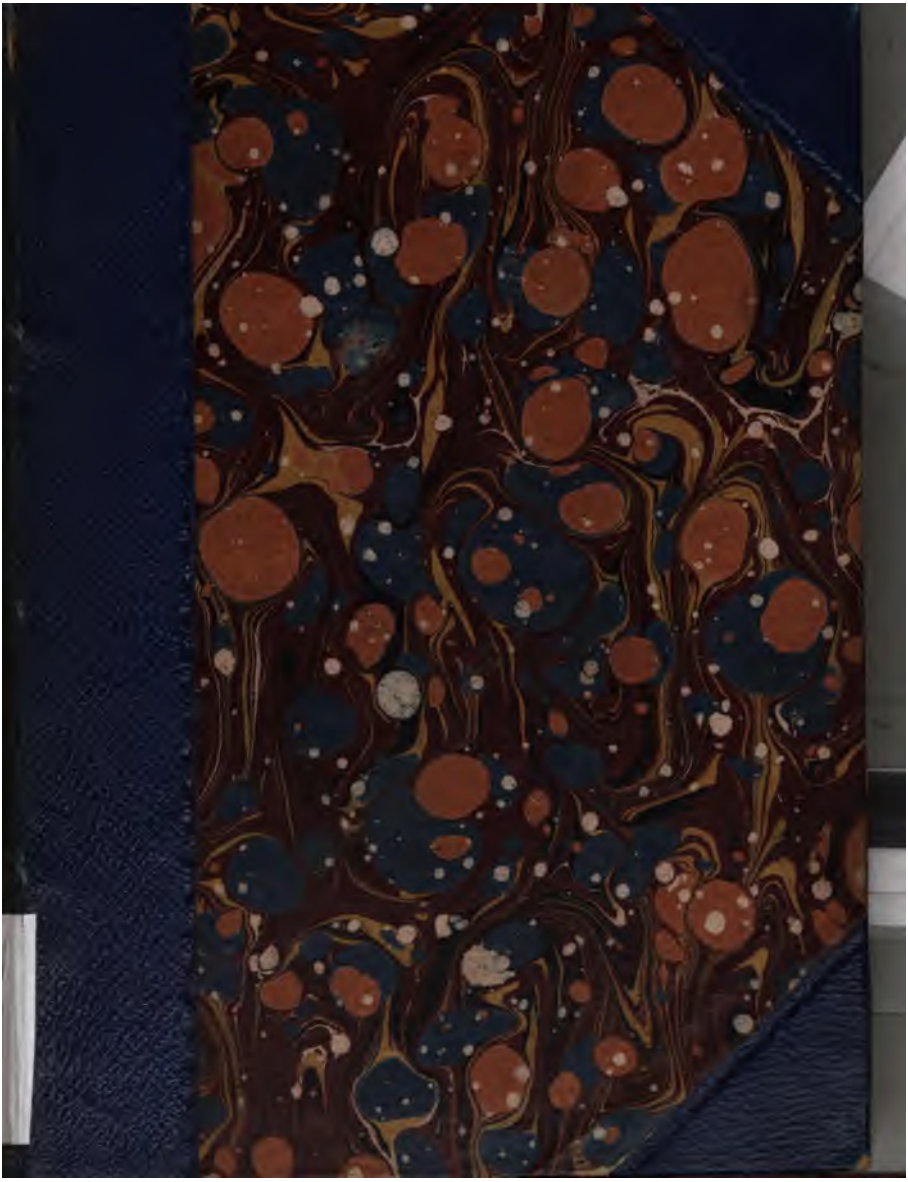

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TWO TALES OF MARRIED LIFE.

BY

GEORGIANA M. CRAIK AND M. C. STIRLING.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

TWO TALES

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HARD TO BEAR.

BY

GEORGIANA M. CRAIK.

A TRUE MAN.

BY

M. C. STIRLING.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1878.

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HARD TO BEAR.

BY

GEORGIANA M. CRAIK.

"She loves with love that will not tire:
And if, alas! she loves alone,
Through passionate duty Love flames higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone."

COVENTRY PATMORE.

HARD TO BEAR.

CHAPTER I.

"Do you not know how old I am?" Norah Etheridge was saying, rather in a tone of surprise, to Mr. Langton, in answer to some remark that he had made.

"You are three or four and twenty, I suppose," he replied.

"I was twenty-two in April."

"Not more?"

"No—but I know I look more."

"Well, perhaps it is hardly so much that you look more as that you are rather more staid than most girls are at two and twenty."

"I know I am. I am often sorry for it."

"I don't know why you should be sorry."

"I think it is a pity not to be girlish when one is young."

"You are quite girlish enough; at least, I mean you are quite girlish enough for my taste."

And then there was a moment's silence, and after that—

"I am glad if you think so," she said quietly.

These two people were not lovers; they were only friends. At least that was what they themselves believed; but when Mr. Langton went almost daily—as he did—to the house in which Norah Etheridge lived, and almost daily spent hours there with her, their friends who talked of them of course thought differently.

It was said by his acquaintances that Mr. Langton had been a disappointed man. There had been some story about him—nobody knew clearly what, for he had lived abroad for the last few years, and only some vague rumours of his history during that time had reached the ears of his friends in London; but some sort of disappointment he had met with, everyone agreed, that had aged and changed him. He was two or three and thirty now, and he looked almost ten years older. He had been very full of life and energy, those said who had known him in his early manhood, but of all this vitality he had managed to get rid. Whatever he had been ten years ago he had sunk at this time into a grave, cold, indifferent man, whose only real pleasure *seemed* to be in books, and who went into society

only on compulsion, and dropped his old friends, and made no new ones.

At least he made no new ones with the single exception of Norah Etheridge. A year ago he had met Norah at a house where he had gone unwillingly to dine, and had talked to her for half the evening. After an hour or two he had said to her suddenly,

"I think I must have known some one once who was related to you. Have you a brother called Allan?"

"Not now," she answered. "I *had* a brother Allan, but he died when he was a boy at Rugby."

"It was at Rugby that I knew him," Mr. Langton said; and then all at once her eyes brightened, and—

"Are you the Roger Langton that he used to talk about?" she exclaimed. "Oh, I was so familiar with your name once. You were one of the big boys when Allan was little, and you used to be so kind to him."

"I liked him. He was a fine, spirited little fellow," the other said. "And he died, poor lad?"

"Yes—he died of heart disease. He was never strong. It was a great grief to us. My aunt that I live with was so fond of him. Will you let me introduce you to my aunt?" she said.

And then Mr. Langton was introduced to the elder Miss Etheridge, and in this way the acquaintance began that soon ripened into intimacy.

Even at that first meeting Mr. Langton was attracted to Norah. He was at this time in the weary exhausted temper that can take no pleasure in the ordinary interests and objects of life: the world had lost its zest for him: he wanted something new to give some flavour of freshness to it, and this new thing he found in her. He had believed himself to be in the frame of mind in which he could say with all his heart that "Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither;" but he had found when he met Norah that still, in some degree at least, he was capable of taking delight in woman. It was not that he fell in love with her, but he became interested in her. Her grave, calm face grew in its way to be very beautiful to him. Miss Etheridge had invited him to visit them, and his visits soon became frequent; and more often than not when he came Miss Etheridge, who was a little afraid of him (though she always spoke of him in the warmest terms, and really believed herself to be greatly attached to him on account of his kindness to her dead nephew), would leave the main part of entertaining him to be done by Norah. "For you see, my dear, I am not bookish," she would say with

plaintive frankness to her niece, "and it's so much easier for you to talk to him than me." And so she would often slip away and leave Mr. Langton to Norah's care,—and to the transcendental conversation in which it was at any rate her simple belief that her visitor and her niece passed the greater part of the time they spent together.

Perhaps, however, she was wrong in thinking that their talk was always transcendental. In the early days of their friendship, indeed, it is true that Mr. Langton had talked a good deal to Norah about books and art, but as time went on, and they grew more intimate, they did not by any means talk of books and art exclusively. They talked of many other subjects besides these—of some that were much more personal than these. He often talked to her of himself and his own life, with, in a large measure, a curious unreserve, and yet—as she always instinctively felt—at the same time, too, a curious reticence. For, however much he might, on any point that touched himself, seem to tell her all, somehow she knew intuitively that he *did* not tell her all—that there was somewhere a closed door in his heart and in his mind that he never opened to her.

Very soon after their acquaintance began he had set himself to give lessons in Italian to Norah, mak-

ing this one of the reasons for his frequent visits to Miss Etheridge's. He had lived for several years in Italy, and Norah chanced to say one day that she should like to be able to read Dante; so he proposed to help her to do this, and came thenceforward two or three times a week to aid her in her studies. The lessons he gave her were genuine lessons. He was not like a man in love, seeking for any pretext to bring him into the presence of the woman who was dear to him; he taught her in all seriousness and single-mindedness, and she learnt and studied hard to please him. I do not say that *she* did not do her part because she loved him, but he at least did not know, and she scarcely knew, that. She was contented only to feel that the lessons were the sweetest lessons of her life.

He said to her one day, "You must not let me make you work too hard," but she laughed when he said that.

"It suits me to work. Do you not think it does?" she asked him.

"Well, it certainly does not seem to do much harm to you," he answered. "And you get on so fast that it would be a pity to do less."

So they went on with their lessons two or three times a week, and then when the lessons were ended he used to stay and talk to her.

He was a grave, quiet man. You would scarcely have noticed him, perhaps, in a room full of people, for it was rare with him to take part in any general talk, but to one person alone, if that person were a companion that pleased him, he could talk well and interestingly. The mind was a delicate mind, cultivated and acute. To Norah, who had lived little hitherto with cultivated people, it seemed more than this; his talent to her seemed to be genius; his refinement, his quickness of perception, his knowledge, all appealed to her as things greater than they were. The girl's own nature was, perhaps, a larger one than his, but education had done for him what it had not done for her, and the result was to give a charm to him in her eyes that set him apart from other men.

For a long time they were friends together without his having learnt how much he had become to her. They had grown intimate with each other within two or three months of their first meeting, and then for a year their intimacy went on undisturbed, bringing nothing but pleasure and soothing to him, and deep but silent happiness to her. During all that time he never on any day or at any hour intended to ask her to marry him. To a certain extent he was conscious that the friendship between them was a friendship that absorbed her, and

that he was, in fact, claiming and accepting a devotion from her that as long as it lasted made her life his; but yet he never cared to put this consciousness into words. And as for her—the only fear she had was the fear that anything should come to change the relations in which they stood to one another. She was content to be only his friend; she believed she should be content to spend her whole life as this last year had been spent—to be, as long as she lived, the woman to whom he would care to come for sympathy, or soothing, or companionship. He had loved some one else before he knew her, she thought. Well, that was all over now; he would not marry now; he would be satisfied, perhaps, only to have some woman near him whom he liked; and it was her highest ambition—simply and exclusively at this time the one thing that she cared for, the one thing she prayed God for—that she might continue throughout her life to be that woman. She prayed for this, never thinking that there was any self-sacrifice in the matter, thinking only that she was praying to hold the thing she cared for most on earth.

"You give me more of your time than I deserve," he said to her one day. "But, do you know, if I had not you to come to the world would be as blank to me as the Great Desert."

He said this to her, looking gravely and tenderly into her face; and she kept his speech in her heart with an unutterable gratitude and gladness.

But meanwhile of course the little world in which they lived talked of them, and called them lovers, and sometimes a passing doubt would even disturb Miss Etheridge's mind about them; and occasionally for a day or two perhaps she would linger in the room while Mr. Langton gave his Italian lesson, and sit clicking her knitting needles while Norah construed Dante. But it was very dull work to listen to the construing of Dante, and it rarely happened that Miss Etheridge could make up her mind to sit out a lesson to the end. She had so many things to do; was it not too much to expect her to act Duenna to her niece, and to so staid and good a niece too, who so little needed a Duenna? So, half feeling as if she were shirking her duty, and yet feeling too that her duty was so very irksome and inconvenient (and needless too), that she could not but desire to shirk it, she would generally, before half an hour was past, steal from the room, leaving the other two at their work, hardly heeding and hardly conscious of either her absence or her presence.

For they were working seriously, and not making or thinking of making love. There might have been

times, perhaps, when her presence would have been felt as an encumbrance by them, but even then it would not have been because they either were or were becoming lovers, but only because the intercourse of two is disturbed by the addition of a third. Their tone to one another was hardly different when they were alone from what it was when Miss Etheridge was with them: they only talked of different things, and were more at ease, and therefore happier.

"I think no kinder aunt than Aunt Bessie ever lived," Norah had said to Mr. Langton more than once. "If I had had a mother, she might have loved me better, but she could not have treated me more kindly."

"If she has been kind to you, I think she has been well rewarded for her kindness," he answered, when she said this. "What would her life be without you?"

He was looking at Norah as he spoke; he used to look at her sometimes with a tender kindness, almost as her father might, or as a brother might.

One day he had said to her, as if with a sudden regret,

"I have often envied men their sisters. I never had one." And then, after a moment, he added, "But I begin to think that you are making me know what it is to have one now."

"That is a kind thing to say. Thank you for saying that," she answered quickly.

The colour came into her face as she spoke; her lips trembled with gladness.

"I could not imagine many better things than to have you for a sister," he said quietly and kindly, and then for a moment he laid his hand on hers.

But there was no trace in either his tone or his touch of anything beyond mere regard—the calm, perhaps grateful, liking of a man who has put youth and the hopes of youth away from him.

CHAPTER II.

It was more than a year after he had begun to know her before Mr. Langton ever seriously questioned with himself whether he should ask Norah to marry him. Up to that time the possibility of their marrying had of course occurred to him, but it was a possibility that he had not cared to entertain; her companionship had become pleasant to him; his friendship for her had come to be almost the sweetest thing in his life, but it was merely friendship, and he felt no impulse within him to make it more. It was something from without, and not from his own heart, that made him first deliberately consider the matter with himself, and induced him finally to come to a decision which, if it had not been for that external pressure, he almost certainly would not have come to.

It happened, during the second autumn of his acquaintance with Norah, that a certain cousin of hers—a young officer whose regiment had been in China, and who had returned home on sick leave—

came to pay a visit to Miss Etheridge. He and Norah were old friends. As children they had played together; as a lad of twenty, when she was eighteen, he had admired, and perhaps made boyish love to her. They had not met now for more than four years, and the girl's face brightened on the morning when the letter came announcing his arrival.

"My cousin, Harry Temple, is coming to us next week," she told Mr. Langton that day. "He used to be such a nice lad. I suppose we shall find him very much changed, but I shall like to see him again."

"Is he coming to stay in this house?" Mr. Langton asked; and when Norah answered "Yes," Mr. Langton said no more; but perhaps, even before the two men met, the elder's feelings towards the younger were not of the most cordial kind. Who likes to be disturbed when he is taking his ease, or enjoys having his special haven of refuge invaded by a stranger?

Mr. Langton came to the house one afternoon, and found the cousins sitting together. Mr. Temple was leaning over Norah's work-table as the other entered the room, looking into her face and talking nonsense to her. He jumped up, indeed, at Mr. Langton's appearance, and on their introduction

showed a sufficient readiness to be courteous to the new-comer; but I am afraid even from this first moment of meeting Mr. Langton set him down in his own mind as a senseless puppy. He was a handsome man, with laughing frank blue eyes, and a complexion like a girl's. He sank down presently again into his seat by Norah's side, and dropped again into his light, gay, half-boyish talk. Perhaps it ruffled Mr. Langton's temper that Norah could be tolerant of such talk, and even seem amused by it. When, after a little while, she sent the young man out of the room, telling him that she and Mr. Langton were going to read Italian, and, when he was gone, made some remark that showed a cordial liking for him, there was a tone of scarcely concealed contempt in Mr. Langton's answer.

"Yes, he seems lively enough, — and empty-headed enough," he said scornfully.

"Oh, you should not be too hard upon him," she exclaimed quickly, when he made that reply. "He is so happy to be at home again, poor lad."

And then for the moment Mr. Langton held his tongue.

But yet, as time went on, whether with reason or without reason, Mr. Temple's constant presence in the house became more and more of an irritation to the elder man. The young officer was always

loitering about; he was always, or almost always, idle; he was constantly monopolizing, or trying to monopolize, Norah. It was soon plain enough to Mr. Langton—perhaps it would have been plain to anyone—that he was falling over head and ears in love with his cousin. He went wherever she went; he followed her like her shadow; he would sit in the room kicking his heels even while Mr. Langton was reading Dante—kicking his heels and knitting his fair young brow too; for, of course, he was jealous of the elder man, and hated these lessons that Norah loved.

"What is that fellow always coming here for with his glum face?" he burst out to Norah once; but when he said this,—"Do you mean Mr. Langton?" she asked instantly. And then something menacing flashed into her eyes, and—"He comes here because he is good enough to like to come; and I think, Harry, when you next speak of him, you had better not call him again what you did just now," she said, in a tone that perhaps made the poor young man turn rather sick at heart.

"I didn't mean to offend you," he answered humbly. "I couldn't think what he was always about the place for—that's all."

And then the girl held her tongue—perhaps because she knew that, if she had spoken again, she

might have said something that afterwards she would have been sorry to have said.

For, though she liked her cousin, do you not think she would rather have spent five minutes, or five moments, with Mr. Langton than five hours, or a whole day, with Harry Temple? She felt very kindly to Mr. Temple; in a way she was even fond of him; but she used to laugh at his love-making; she treated him as a boy who was merely amusing himself; she had her heart too full of other things to have room in it for him.

"It is a pity that no one can find some occupation for that young fellow," Mr. Langton said one day in a tone of contempt. "He does not seem to be without the ordinary faculties of a human being, only apparently he is without any conception how to employ them."

He gave a half-laugh as he spoke; you might have thought that the young man roused no other feelings in him than those of pity or derision; but yet, in reality, though it suited his humour to speak so, the poor lad's presence had come by this time to be so galling a thorn in his side that it had begun to tempt him to break through all the intentions that he had hitherto formed, and had almost determined him to ask Norah to be his wife.

For this young coxcomb's foolish love-making—

did it not entirely spoil his comfort in her society? He could not be sure of a quiet hour spent with her; let him come when he would he found the other dancing attendance on her. He did not so far misunderstand her as to suppose she cared for her cousin's attentions — that fear gave him no trouble; but he began to argue with himself that this silly boy might disturb his peace for months if he took no steps to prevent it; nay—he began to say to himself—when this one was gone others might succeed to him: she was young and handsome; it was not likely that Harry Temple would be the only man to fall in love with her.

Would it not be better that he should marry her himself, and bring all danger of such things happening to an end? A year ago he had thought that he was philosophical enough to bear the thought of her becoming the wife of another man, but now —though he was still not in love with her—he knew that he should find it very bitter to see her the wife of another man.

"What better thing could I do than marry her?" he began hourly to ask himself. "Why should I run the risk of losing a thing that has become a necessity to me? If I knew merely of a friend whose presence would make life sweeter, would I not try to secure that friend's companionship?—and, if so,

how much more should I not try to secure Norah's companionship?"

He argued with himself in this way day after day, and day after day the sight of Mr. Temple in the house, fretting him to perpetual irritation, acted as a spur to his resolve—until in the end the thing came about that he had said to himself for a long time should never come.

One day—when possibly Harry Temple had tried his temper even more than usual—almost in a fit of impatience rather than of love, he at last asked Norah to be his wife. The poor lad on this day had been hanging for half the morning about his cousin in his usual idle fashion, and Mr. Langton found him—as he constantly did find him—still at the same occupation when, early in the afternoon, he called at the house. He had come to read with Norah, but for half an hour Mr. Temple chattered his idle nonsense, and would not let them read. The young man had been teasing his cousin to sing with him—to go out with him—to do fifty things. He sat with his hands in his pockets, balancing himself on the back legs of his chair, even after Mr. Langton and Norah had opened their books: they had turned their backs on him, and he had been forced to hold his tongue for twenty minutes before it pleased him at last to leave them to themselves.

Perhaps it was not much to be wondered at that Mr. Langton's patience gave way after this. He let the door close behind his tormentor, and then he startled Norah with a sentence said so angrily that it brought the colour to his face.

"If that boy is to go on eternally coming between us in that way I must take means to prevent it," he suddenly exclaimed.

He pushed his book from him as he spoke; he turned his face to Norah.

"I am so sorry—" she had begun to say deprecatingly; but he interrupted her before she could bring her sentence to an end.

"I don't blame you for a moment; how could I blame you?" he asked quickly. "Do you suppose I think it is your fault? But you see how he spoils all our time together, and—as things stand now—what right have I to interfere? You know there is only one way in which I can put an end to it. You understand that, do you not?" He laid his hand suddenly on hers as he said this. "You understand that, if we were known to belong to one another, he could not go on persecuting you?"

She had turned from white to red while he made this speech. It was not a lover's speech —how could she help feeling that?—it was only the impatient speech of an irritated man. It would

have made many women angry; but Norah, I suppose, thought too humbly of her own claims upon him for anger to make any part of the feeling it aroused in her. There was only shyness and anxiety in her tone as she began to answer him.

"I know that Harry's being here so much has been an annoyance to you,—but it will not go on now much longer. If you will not mind bearing it just a little longer, then we shall be alone again," she began to say hurriedly, with her heart beating fast.

"Yes — until a new fool comes," he sharply answered; but the next moment, in a different tone—"Forgive me for speaking so; it is I who am the fool," he exclaimed quickly. "I am a fool ever to have thought that I could keep you in this way. I did imagine until lately that we might go on simply as we have done, but as long as I am only your friend, I have no right to keep other people away from you; and, you see, I have become selfish enough to *want* to do that. While there is no acknowledged tie between us any day that dawns may part you from me."

"You need not fear that,—not as long as you want me," she said in a low voice.

"Then that means that I keep you from marrying at all."

"But I do not want to marry," she said.

"No, perhaps not; nor, until lately, did *I* want to marry; but I want you to understand how I cannot endure to have other people coming between us."

"It shall not happen again," she said quickly. "Do not think it has not been a vexation to me too. I am afraid you think I have not cared. You are wrong—I have cared more than you have, I think. But Harry will go away in a few weeks, and—and then we shall be alone again."

She spoke hurriedly and deprecatingly, as if the fault had been all hers that this idle young officer had hung about her, and as if he had a right to be angry. And then there was a pause for a few moments, during which, perhaps, he questioned with himself whether he should take her at her word and tacitly withdraw his proposal; or whether he should repeat it, and press her acceptance of it. It would be simplest to remain silent and require no acceptance; but yet, though it would be simplest to do this, he could not make up his mind to become silent now. He had begun to speak, and, wholly without passion as his affection for her was, the natural instinctive desire to gain what he had begun to take steps for gaining, made him resolve to repeat what he had said.

"I do not see why Mr. Temple's going or staying need make any difference now," he said, breaking the silence after a few moments had passed. "His being here during these weeks has shown me how little I can bear that any one else should have claims upon you. When it comes to that—when a man is fretted by the presence of any other man near a woman that he cares for, I think there is only one thing left for him to do. I know I am not an ardent lover, "Norah," he said quickly,—"not what I might have been once, but the truth is simply that you have made yourself so much to me that I cannot bear the thought of living without you now. Nor do I think that now I could bear the thought of having no more of you than I have hitherto had. It is not enough for me any longer to come here and be with you for a few hours in the week: I want to have you always beside me; I want you for my constant companion. There may be many men who would be glad to say more than this to you—I am not blind to that fact—but this, at least, I do say with my whole heart, that you have it in your power to become the blessing and consolation of my life."

"Ah, that would be too much! I could never be that," she said quickly.

"You *would* be that; you could not be less."

"If I thought that was true, do you imagine I would not marry you?" she said trembling. "For me——" she stopped for a moment, and then, with a thrill in her voice, went on quickly and passionately, "for me, do you think that any other thing in all the world could be so sweet as to be with you? You have a right to take me if you like—you have a right to all my life. But I think——" and she hesitated and spoke timidly again—"this is how it seems to me—I think your annoyance about Harry has made you say something that you never meant to say, and that you will regret having said presently, when he is gone. You know all this past year we have never thought of being married. It is a new idea with you; it has only been put into your mind by Harry being here. Wait now till he is gone, and see if you are not contented to let things be between us as they were before. I think—I am almost sure—you will be content."

"You may think that, but you are wrong," he answered quickly. And then after a moment's silence he took her hand in his. "You say I have the right to take you if I like. I do take you, then," he said.

CHAPTER III.

A COUPLE of months after their engagement Mr. Langton and Norah were married. Mr. Langton had set his face against there being any delay. "If we are to be together, the sooner we are together the better," he said. He had told Miss Etheridge of Norah's acceptance of his proposal within an hour of the time when he had made it. She had tried to induce him not to speak to her aunt at once—"for fear there should be any change," she said timidly; but he would not listen to that argument. I am afraid he was maliciously eager that poor Harry Temple should know that Norah was to be his wife as soon as it was possible for the news to be given to him. Amongst the minor pleasures that his engagement brought to him there was probably for the moment none so keen to him as the power he had gained by it of discomfiting Mr. Temple. He had laughed to himself as he went home on the day when he had made his proposal, at the thought that on his next visit to Norah he

should scarcely be troubled any more by the young man's love-making. He had done something that, at any rate, had put an end to that.

As for poor Harry,—when he was told the news the fair young face changed colour at it, and grew white for a few moments.

"What—going to marry Mr. Langton? Why, the fellow is no more in love with her than—than I am in love with you!" he exclaimed, quivering and indignant, to Miss Etheridge, who had communicated the tidings to him.

"My dear boy, you must not speak so. Not in love with her! Why, what do you suppose could make him want to marry her if he was not in love with her?" Miss Etheridge exclaimed in a shocked voice.

"How can I tell? Jealousy—or envy—or something of that kind. He's as envious a hound, I believe, as ever came into a house."

"Harry! Harry!" Miss Etheridge cried.

"Do you think I don't know, Aunt Bessie? He has hated me ever since I have been here. I believe he has proposed to her for nothing but because—because he couldn't stand the thought that I might get her. I wish she might make him miserable!" cried the unhappy lad, half beside himself for the moment.

"So you're going to marry that fellow?—and—and I love your little finger more than he does your whole body," he said ruefully to his cousin an hour afterwards.

"Hush, Harry—you have no right to say so," she answered gravely.

"No—of course I have no right. I have no right to do anything, I suppose, but grin and wish you joy,—but I'm hanged if I wish you joy! You'd better have married me than him, Norah. I know very well I'm not good enough for you,—and I can't jabber Italian and talk about art and all the rest of it as he does; but I love you better than he will ever love you, and—and books and art are all very well, but love is the first thing, Norah. That's more than all the rest," said the poor lad, with a break in his voice.

He was to have stayed for another month with them, but after he knew of Norah's engagement he would not stay. So he packed up his portmanteau one morning, and with a very lugubrious face bade good-bye to her.

"There's sometimes a slip, you know, Norah, between the cup and the lip," he said with a bitter laugh half an hour before his departure. "I don't suppose I've a chance now,—but yet, if this should fall through somehow——"

"You must not talk such nonsense, Harry," she said quickly. "If I were to give Mr. Langton up now do you think I should be worth anybody else's having?"

"I only wish you would do it, and you would soon see what I thought."

And then, though she laughed at him, she treated him very gently.

"I always told you not to care for me. You know I did, Harry. You are angry with me, but it is not my fault," she said.

"I'm not angry with *you*," he answered, sullenly.

"Well, but still you are angry. You think you have been hardly treated, and you have not been hardly treated, and all I can do is to be sorry. I am very sorry, Harry—sorrier than you think!"

"Not you," he said; "you don't care a straw."

But somehow before he went away she persuaded him that she *did* care a straw, and the poor lad's eyes were moist at last when he left her.

No leave-taking had been gone through between him and Mr. Langton. The young man had refused to say good-bye to his rival, and Mr. Langton laughed when he heard that he was gone.

"A foolish, hot-headed young fellow," he said. "What, he thinks he owes me a grudge, does he?

Would you have married him, Norah, if I had not asked you first?" and he put his hand upon her shoulder, and looked with secure eyes into her face. He knew that he need not have feared a hundred Harry Temples; perhaps he knew only too well how fast the girl's heart was his.

In a tender, quiet, passionless way Norah grew very dear to Mr. Langton during the weeks before they were married. If he treated her hardly as if he were her lover, at least he gave her an amount of affection and confidence that made her—to whom the thought of belonging to him was still like a thought of entering heaven—unutterably proud and glad. He asked her suddenly one day if she was happy, and the light came into her eyes as he put his question to her, and her lips began to quiver.

"Happy!" she repeated, passionately; and then all at once, for the first time that she had ever done it, she threw her arms about his neck. "Oh, my God, am I *not* happy!" she cried, in a voice that had a great ring in it.

"My poor child!" he said, half sadly.

He held her to him and kissed her with grave tenderness; he stood for a minute gently stroking her hand as she trembled beside him. Perhaps in that moment he felt that he was not worthy of her,

and was abashed in the presence of a love that was so much greater than his own.

Their wedding was an entirely quiet one, for Mr. Langton was not a man who cared to be married in the midst of a crowd of lookers-on. Miss Etheridge in vain threw out hints about a wedding breakfast, and the desirability of asking a few intimate friends; he had made up his mind that neither friends nor wedding breakfast should trouble him. So one November morning, without show of any kind, he and Norah were married, and at the church door, when the ceremony was ended, they bade good-bye to Miss Etheridge, and started on the first stage of their journey to Italy, where they meant to spend the remainder of the winter.

"I don't see why he need have been so stiff about the matter; I think he might have let her be married like anybody else," Miss Etheridge said to herself (not for the first time) as she got into her carriage again after she had parted from them, and drove home. Aunt Bessie, perhaps, had begun by this time to have her own silent opinion about her new nephew. "He's very clever and all that, of course, but he's not the sort of man who would ever have taken *my* fancy," she had perhaps thought before this; and thinking so again now she went back with a sigh to her solitary house, which looked

cheerless and desolate in the dull winter day as she entered it. The other two had gone away without much consideration, perhaps, for the woman they had left behind, whom Norah's marriage had made childless.

They expected to be out of England for three months—three months during which would not life, Norah thought, be like Paradise? To see Italy—to see Rome—and to see it with Mr. Langton!

CHAPTER IV.

NORAH saw Rome and Italy. They remained abroad from November till February. Whether during the whole of that time her life was quite what she had dreamt it would be may perhaps be doubted; I think, at any rate, that by the end of it her heaven was scarcely altogether free from the taint of earth.

They were sitting together in a Paris hotel, one afternoon soon after February had begun, resting after a morning spent at the Louvre.

"Are you tired, Norah?" Mr. Langton had just asked; and when Norah answered readily, "No" (though she *looked* tired enough), he held out a newspaper to her, and asked her if she would read him some article in it to which he pointed, for the pale print on such vile paper tried his eyes.

She had been sitting in an easy-chair, but she rose instantly when he spoke, and that he might hear her the better—for the room was noisy—took an upright chair beside the sofa on which he lay. He did not notice that the seat she came to was

less comfortable than the one that she had left: some men would.

She read for half an hour, but he carped at one article, and then at another, and at last she laughed and told him he was out of humour with the world.

"Yes, perhaps,—and with myself, too," he answered in a weary tone when she said that.

"And—with me?" she asked, after a moment, half timidly, half in jest.

"With you?" he answered. "No, I am never out of humour with you." But his voice was only kind as he said this. "You are the only thing that is never out of joint," he said.

Good words to use, only he spoke them as though the truth that was in them (if it *were* a truth) made him rather envy her than love her.

"I used to be out of joint very often once," she said, after a moment or two's silence, with an effort to speak lightly. "Before you came to me I used to be discontented with fifty things."

"And now, are you discontented with none? What a wonderful woman you must be, Norah!"

"Ah, you think I am speaking foolishly. But may one not be perfectly happy once in one's life —if one can?" she said, trying under a light tone to hide her earnestness. "I know it can't go on like this—I am not so foolish as to expect it can.

I know the clouds will come presently, even—even though I am your wife."

"Yes, that fact won't do much, I am afraid, to keep them at a distance," he said.

"Do you think it won't?"

"I strongly suspect it. However, let the clouds come or not, we are better together than apart. I should feel lost enough without you now, Norah."

"I like you to say that."

"I often think, if I had not you here, what intolerable work all this journeying and sight-seeing would be."

"I am afraid even *with* me here you are getting very tired of it, Roger." She said this timidly.

"Well, I shan't be sorry when it is ended now. I wish we had got a house of our own, Norah, and could go straight to it."

"Yes, I wish we had."

"You must begin your search for one as soon as ever we reach London. Your aunt is an excellent woman, but I couldn't stand very much of her."

"Oh no, I know that."

"I would rather at once take a furnished house for six months, if there was any difficulty about the matter."

"Yes, but I hope there won't be much difficulty."

"Well, keep your aunt off me, that is all. You see, I ought to begin to work. If I am to do that book I was talking of, I should not be long in setting about it."

"No, of course not."

And then, after a moment or two, she bent down and slipped her hand into his, and—

"Dear, will it not be nice when we are in our own house?" she said—"when you sit working in your study, and I may come and look at you?"

"Very nice indeed."

"Will you let me come sometimes and sit there too? I hope you will. I will sit in any corner that you like, and be as quiet as a mouse."

"Well, I shall have to submit to you, I suppose."

"It won't go very much against the grain, will it?"

"I don't know. I must try the experiment before I can tell you that."

"Ah! say something kind to me!"

"What do you want, you exacting woman?" And then he looked into her face and laughed. "You need very much to be told that I like to have you with me—don't you?"

"Yes, I need to be told that." She laughed too, but the colour was in her face.

"Well, I think I am pretty well contented with my wife's company."

"Ah, my dear!"—and with a little passionate gesture her cheek went to his.

"What makes you so fond of hearing stale truths, Norah?" he said, a moment afterwards.

"Do you call it a stale truth that you are satisfied with me? That is not stale! It is the sweetest, freshest truth in all the world."

"Is that what you think it, poor child?"

"Don't call me poor. I am the richest woman that I know."

"Well, the others can't have much to boast of. The richest woman that you know! My poor Norah!" he repeated suddenly, in a tone half of tenderness, half almost of scorn; and then she became silent, for involuntarily something in his accent or in his words chilled her. Perhaps the same thing had happened before, and this was not the first day on which he had seemed to pity and laugh at her for the greatness of her love.

Could he have done it if he himself had loved her more? She had known from the first how calm his affection for her was compared with hers for him, but she had deceived herself at the beginning

into thinking that she could be satisfied with such inequality between them. Now, however, that she had been his wife for four months, she had begun to find that she could not be so satisfied, and the yearning which, once roused, is not easily to be quenched again, had begun to torture her.

She was so little to him; shrink as she might from avowing it to herself, that was the bare hard truth. It was not that others were more—that bitterest of pains was spared to her; others were for the most part nothing, but she was only (at least at times—or so it seemed to her) a little *less* than nothing. He had his own thoughts far apart from her; he had lived through a past of which he never spoke to her. If she ever tried—as she did once or twice—to steal into his confidence, he would perceive her intention, and coldly put her from him. He was always kind to her—often even tender—but it was the kindness and the tenderness of a friend or a brother; he never made her feel, by anything he did, or any word he spoke, that he had made her flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone.

She had begun, by the time she had been married for three months, to learn something of all this. She was wonderfully happy still, for the right which she had gained to love him, and spend herself for him, still seemed to her the sweetest and greatest

thing on earth—a thing greater even than the joy of being loved by him, but yet already there had come moments again and again, when something he had said, or failed to say, had given a strange pang to her,—when some look or tone had chilled her,—when some chance blindness of perception on his part (which never could have existed where love had been) had made her heart turn sick.

"Roger, if I were to go away from you now, would you be sorry?" she had said to him one day lately, with a craving that she could not resist to win some sign of love from him; but he merely answered, half impatiently,

"How can you ask me such a question, Norah?"

And then the colour came to her face, and she was silent, till, after a minute, he put his hand upon her shoulder, and, with a laugh—

"You are fond of saying childish things," he said. "You are very fond—are you not?—of being fed with sugar-plums."

"Yes—I am afraid I am," she answered, and tried to laugh too. "Only my master is not very fond of giving them to me," she added next moment half-shyly.

"Because your master, you see, knows that they are unwholesome food."

But he turned her face to him as he spoke and

kissed it. "I don't want to have a too exacting wife, Norah," he said, half-warningly.

"I will try not to be exacting, dear."

"Don't you *know* that, when you ask if I should be sorry to be without you, you are putting a foolish question to me? Sorry! Why, if you were away from me what should I have left to live for?"

And then when he said this the glad colour flowed up into her cheek, and she put her arms about his neck, and for the moment thought she had gained what she wanted, and was wholly happy; till, perhaps, when a calmer hour came, she saw that he had in reality only told her what she knew before—that of the little regard he gave to the world around him he gave most to her. Had what he said amounted to more than that? Did what he say *ever* amount to more?

Once she had said to him (it was one day when he had been very kind to her: she said caressingly) —"Roger, I want you to tell me something. I am not jealous, you know—I could not be jealous now —but yet I want you to tell me something. Long ago, when you were younger, used you to care for many women?"

"No. Has anything made you think I did?" he answered rather shortly.

"Oh no—I was only wondering. Of course

people are so different. Some men fall in love—or what they call in love—so often."

"And so do some women, I believe."

"Yes, I suppose they do; but not so much as men. Of course I know"—her heart was beating fast as she said this; she felt that her lips were trembling too—"of course I know that I am not the only woman you have liked. I know that, dear."

"Possibly not."

"Then, if you liked somebody else—dear, why did you not marry her?"

"Why do you ask such foolish questions, Norah? Suppose I liked some one when I was younger; what does that signify now? Have you so little to trouble you that you must try to disinter some old imaginary story in order to fit yourself with a grievance?"

He spoke almost roughly. He did not see, or did not choose to see, how his rebuke made her flush, and brought the tears to her eyes.

She made no answer to him; after a minute or two he spoke to her about something else, and then, when she replied shyly, with a cold look in his face he put his hand on her arm.

"Norah, be satisfied," he said, abruptly. "If you were not more to me than any one else do you think I should have married you?"

And after that, what more could she say? I am afraid, like a weak woman, she only put her cheek to his, as if she had done something wrong, and asked him to forgive her.

So he kissed her, and then was kind to her again, and their evening, as far as outward appearance went, ended happily; but perhaps she lay awake afterwards and tortured herself about this story which he would not tell her, and with jealous anguish yearned to know who the woman was whom he had loved (she felt) as he did not love her. "Oh, thank God at least that it is over!" she might have thought to herself before she fell asleep (for how few of us are unselfish, and how could she help rejoicing that he was hers, and not that other woman's?) and so perhaps she closed her eyes at last still thinking that her lot was sweeter than any other creature's lot.

"You are looking wonderfully well, my dear," Miss Etheridge said to her niece when the Langtons came back to London in the second week of February.

"I have been too happy to be anything but well," Norah replied, with a glad flush coming to her cheek, and she stole her hand within her husband's arm as she made this answer, and looked up to him with a look of pride that—I fear Miss

Etheridge in her heart thought—was not much warranted by the face she gazed on. For to tell the truth, as far as externals went, it was Norah herself, and not her husband, that most people would have looked at. The girl's face, with its fine features and clear pale colour, had all warmed and softened in these last months; her eyes seemed to have grown sweeter, her lips to have become more sensitive. Mr. Langton looked merely as a thousand other men look—gentlemanly and cultivated, but neither handsome nor imposing. He was scarcely taller than his wife (but she was tall for a woman), he was slight in make, and, if not undignified, yet in no way remarkable for dignity. I daresay in his wife's eyes he had King written on his forehead, but I am afraid the world in general did not see that inscription. Certainly Miss Etheridge did not not see it as she stood before him and Norah, and thought to herself that her niece might have married a handsomer man.

"But, to be sure, beauty is only skin deep, so, if he makes her happy, we need not mind about anything else," the good lady reflected consolingly; and then—a little uneasily conscious perhaps of some want of warmth in her feeling towards him—she began to devote herself to his entertainment, and exerted herself to that end so heroically all the

evening that when her guests retired to their room at the end of it, I regret to be forced to confess that Mr. Langton delivered himself to his wife of certain expressions concerning her which, if she could have heard them, would have made her hair stand on end.

"What in the world has thrown your aunt into such a state of excitement?" he exclaimed. "If she is to go on talking to this extent every evening it will soon become intolerable. I think you will have to manage to let me sit by myself, Norah," he declared; nor could Norah for a few minutes restore his equanimity.

She had to contrive during the days that followed to keep Miss Etheridge and her husband for the most part separate. "Roger wants to be busy. I have been wondering if you would let him have the breakfast-room for a study. Do you think you could—while we stay here?" she said diplomatically to her aunt on the morning after their arrival; and happily, Miss Etheridge—who, in spite of her vivacity the previous night, was far from feeling at ease with her guest, and, except for civility's sake, desired his company as little as he wished for hers—caught at the proposal with enthusiasm. So Mr. Langton was speedily installed as lord of the breakfast-room, and, after paying him a single visit of

ceremony, Miss Etheridge religiously abstained, during his occupation of it, from again crossing the threshold of that apartment.

After searching about London for ten days Norah found a substantial, pretty, old-fashioned house that was to be let at Highgate.

"I am afraid it is inconveniently far out of town," Mr. Langton said, when she came home after her first visit to it, and told him how much she liked it; but he went with her to Highgate the next day, and when he saw the delight with which she took him from room to room, and rambled about the sweet old shady garden with him, he had not the heart to tell her that they should find more of the conveniences of life in a new-fashioned house at Bayswater or Kensington. In fact, he too was taken with the place himself.

"Don't you think we should be happy here, dear? Should you not like us to be here?" she asked him; and when she said this, and when he saw her bright eager face, he could not but answer "Yes." So their original plan of living in town was given up, and one happy day, six weeks after they had returned to England, Norah and her husband took possession of their own house.

She had grown so tired, during these six weeks that she had lived as a guest at Miss Etheridge's

house, of her long enforced absences from her husband,—so weary of the restrictions under which alone, even when she was at home, she could be with him.

"I am hungering and thirsting for more of you," she said to him one day when she had come to visit him in his temporary study. He was sitting writing as she said this. They had been together for an hour, and at the hour's end she had to go to her aunt, and she did not want to go. She put her arms round him, and pressed his head upon her bosom. With a sudden yearning—"Ah, dear love, if you only wanted me half as much as I want you!" she said.

"I want you quite as much as you want me," he answered calmly when she made that speech. "I always want you, Norah,"—and he looked up to her with placid kind eyes, and stroked the hand that lay upon his shoulder.

"*Do* you want me? It is very sweet of you to say that," she answered softly; and then she went away, trying to feel content; but in the bottom of her heart she knew that she was not content—that he had not answered her yearning cry—that he *could* not answer it.

"Is it always so, I wonder?" she went away

thinking. "Is there always '*l'un qui baise, et l'un qui tend la joue?*'"

"God bless us in the life we may lead here together," she thought in her heart as she and her husband crossed the threshold of their new house; but she did not say her prayer aloud, and he—probably he uttered no prayer either in his heart or with his lips. He was looking round him; he had not seen the house since it had been furnished. "The hall looks very well, Norah. I like this square roomy entrance," he merely said.

Yet in his own way Mr. Langton too was thankful to find himself at last lord in his own castle. His spirits rose. He went over the house from basement to attic: he was pleased with everything that Norah had done, and praised her till he brought the happy colour to her face.

"Why, child, how you must have worked!" he said to her once.

"I wanted to please you. I wanted you to like it," she replied.

"I think with that object in view you would work the skin off your fingers," he said suddenly; and then she gave a little laugh.

"If I would, could I do better?" she asked.

Mr. Langton took kindly to his house. It seemed to Norah, for the first few weeks after they took

possession of it, that he was happier and more content than she had ever known him. He was working, and his work interested him. He wrote, and she sat with him while he wrote; he read his manuscript to her, and talked to her about the subject of his book. They used to go out and walk in the green Highgate lanes; they were together nearly the whole day, but neither of them seemed to tire of that companionship. As time passed, she saw with a glad and grateful heart how he began gradually to show dependence on her—to trust to her doing certain things for him—to be uneasy if he missed her.

Her quick sympathy in all he did, or thought, or wished to do, seemed to become necessary to him. One day, when she had left him for a longer time than usual, having had to go in to town, on her return he almost scolded her.

"I have wanted you for a dozen things," he said; "and there have been people coming for you too—I don't know who they are. Everything gets at sixes and sevens when you are out of the way."

"I would come and see you oftener, dear aunt, but Roger does not like me to be out when he is at home," she had said to Miss Etheridge that afternoon.

Perhaps Aunt Bessie had begun to think that

her niece's visits were very few and far between, and to feel a little sore and neglected, and Norah was sorry that she should feel neglected; and yet, what could she do? If her husband at this time had bound her to his side with a chain of iron, would she not have been satisfied with her captivity?

She had come, too, before this to find herself in some embarrassment with regard to the friends and acquaintances that she had had before her marriage. A good many people had come to call on her and Mr. Langton, and a good many invitations had been given to them, but Mr. Langton would neither accept the invitations nor return the calls.

"*You* must return them, I suppose," he said to Norah. "You had better make two or three days of it, and get them over in a lump; but as for going out in the evenings, I set my face against it for both of us. You can't go without me, and I *won't* go; so, my dear, get your civil friends to understand that."

But it was not quite an easy task for Norah to make her friends understand that, and she had to submit to some vexation before it was managed. Old friends took offence when she declined their invitations; some to her face found angry fault with her husband.

"Of course I know it is Mr. Langton's fault—I don't blame *you*, my dear," one lady said stiffly (it was the lady at whose house she and Mr. Langton had first met). "It is *his* fault, of course; but I must say, however little he may care to go out in general, I do think an exception might be made in *our* case." And she swept out at the door, leaving Norah vexed and sorry.

"Mrs. Chamberlain is quite angry because we won't dine with her," she said presently to her husband, a little tentatively. "She thinks, although we refuse everybody else's invitation, we ought to accept hers."

But Mr. Langton merely raised his head with a momentary laugh.

"Mrs. Chamberlain will get over her anger," he said. "If you go to one person's house you must go to twenty. The thing can't be done, Norah."

And then she held her tongue—for in her heart did she not dread as much as Mr. Langton to have the solitude of their happy life disturbed?

What did she want but to have her husband to herself all day?—day after day? *He* had his work to occupy his thoughts, and *she* had—him. Of course she knew that it was mainly his work, and not her love, that kept him content—that it was his foremost interest, and that she was only something

secondary to it—something almost in the background; but yet she was very happy, for, if she was not all to her husband that she longed to be, at least she knew that no other woman—no living creature, man or woman—was more to him than she was. Of the rivalry of a mere lifeless book she could not be jealous. Was she indeed not glad that he should be engrossed in his work? Her own interest and pride in it were unbounded: as it slowly advanced, her belief that her husband was one of the most profound thinkers of the age grew constantly firmer: she used to strain her mind to follow his speculations, and when they became too abstruse for her to understand, faith was always standing ready at the point where comprehension became dim.

CHAPTER V.

THE Langtons had been in their house for three or four months, when one afternoon a visitor rang their door bell, and asked for Mr. Langton. He sent in his card, and Norah received it from the servant, and handed it to her husband.

"'Mr. Forrester,'" she read. "Who is he?"

Mr. Langton took the card quickly from her.

"Oh, he is some one,—he—he is a man I know," he replied rather hurriedly.

There was an uneasy expression in his face. He sat looking at the card for a few moments in silence, and then suddenly threw it down, and without speaking again to Norah left the room.

He went to his visitor, and was absent for half an hour. Then Norah heard the door of the drawing-room open again, and he came back to the study where he had left her.

"Dear, I want you to come and see Mr. Forrester," he said,

His face had resumed its ordinary look, and his tone was quiet and commonplace.

"He is a man I used to know in town—a good kind of man. I think you will like him. I suspect we shall have to ask him to stay to dinner."

Mr. Forrester rose up as Norah came into the drawing-room. He was a tall, grey-haired man, with a gentle face.

"I am very glad to see you—very glad," he said to her with emphasis as she gave him her hand.

She could hardly return his greeting with equal warmth, but she said something civilly, and they sat down. She soon found that Mr. Forrester had come lately from abroad. He had been in the south of France with his wife, who had died there. He was full of his trouble over her death, and began almost at once to talk of it. He was evidently a kindly, garrulous man, eager for sympathy, and as ready to seek it from new friends as from old. He had already told the story of his wife's death once to Mr. Langton before Norah entered the room, but only with the greater zest on account of that did he set himself to repeat it for Norah's benefit, almost as soon as they had both sat down. He told her of all the poor lady's sufferings—of her gradual decline

—of the false hopes of her recovery that had been occasionally raised—finally of her death and burial.

"And are you alone now?—have you no children?" Norah asked kindly when the long account seemed at last to have come to an end.

"None who live with me," he answered. "I have a son and daughter, but my son is in India, and my daughter is married. Susan is still in the old house, Langton, but you haven't been to see her, I think, this long time?"

"No—I go almost nowhere; I pay no visits," Mr. Langton answered.

"Well, so I heard—so I heard. But she would be very glad to see you. You oughtn't to drop old friends. I think she must come and call on Mrs. Langton. Do you know how I found out your address? I was dining out yesterday, and I met that little fellow Chamberlain, and he told me. I knew before that that you were married, but I hadn't a notion whether you were in England or not."

"What a diner out Chamberlain is! One hears of him being everywhere; and as for hiding oneself in London, the thing is impossible. Not that I mean I want to hide myself from *you*," Mr. Langton said with rather a nervous laugh; "but when we came out here to the wilds of Highgate, I thought the

world would forget us, and instead of that my wife has callers enough to——"

He left his ungracious sentence unended, and rose up suddenly from his seat. "Come out and see our garden," he said. "Norah is very proud of her garden, and it is not to be despised for one so near town."

Their visitor stayed to dinner, and during that meal, and for the remainder of the evening after it, he continued to pour out a slow gentle stream of talk, till Norah wondered if the perpetual flow would ever cease.

It was half-past ten when he got upon his feet at last.

"Well—I must be going," he said, and yet even then he lingered a little longer. "It seems so natural to me to be talking to your husband again, Mrs. Langton," he told Norah. "You know we used to see a great deal of him—in my poor wife's time. She was very fond of you, Langton. You always knew that *she* was your friend—didn't you?"

"Yes—yes," Mr. Langton replied quickly—almost impatiently too, Norah thought.

"But there is nothing but change in this world —nothing but change both for old and young. Ah, dear me!—You know, of course"—this was said as

if with a sudden recollection—" of course you know that poor Mrs. Elton is back again in England?"

Norah saw her husband make a sharp movement; next moment when he spoke she could not but hear the curious harshness in his voice.

"No—I know nothing about it," he said quickly, and then he began hurriedly to walk towards the door.

"Had you a coat, Forrester—or an umbrella, or anything? I don't want to hurry you, you know, only if you mean to catch that omnibus——"

"Yes—yes—quite right; I'm a great loiterer; my poor dear wife had always to keep me up to time. Good night, Mrs. Langton. You must let me bring my daughter to see you. Good night. It has been a great pleasure to me to make your acquaintance. Yes—I *had* an umbrella, I think. That's it. Come and look me up some day, Langton. You mustn't cut your old friends. Good night, once more. Good night." And the door at last closed behind him.

"What a gentle old man!—but oh, Roger, I—I hope he has a good many acquaintances in town?" Norah exclaimed as soon as she and her husband were left alone. "You do not think—do you, that he will come here very often?"

Mr. Langton burst out laughing.

"I suspect it would have been as lucky for us if he had not chanced to meet Mr. Chamberlain last night," he said.

"He has been here for six hours! And, if he had not come, we might have had such a nice walk together."

"And I could have got a couple more hours' work. Yes—certainly, it is rather unlucky that he has found us out. However, we can't help it, Norah, so let us have a little peace now before we go to bed."

And accordingly they both got their books and sat down and read; but, though she read, there was a question in Norah's heart that she was thinking of more than of the page before her, and that she wanted and tried in vain to get courage to ask; and once at least, if no more, Mr. Langton put his hand over his eyes, and, though he had his open book before him, sat looking at it and reading nothing. But neither of them spoke, and Norah's question was not asked.

Three or four days after this evening Mr. Forrester re-appeared at Highgate, bringing, as he had promised, his daughter, Mrs. Furnivall, to call on Norah; and Mr. Langton being out on this occasion, Norah saw her visitors alone.

"They came and stayed for nearly an hour,"

she reported to her husband on his return,—"and they talked a great deal, and I was very civil to them—but I am afraid I don't like Mrs. Furnivall much. She seems so very managing and patronizing."

"She was always that," he replied. "No—I never cared about her. A clever, coarse sort of woman, I think. However, for Forrester's sake you must return her call soon, and then you can manage to let the thing drop. It is quite useless to keep up acquaintances of that sort."

"Quite," Norah agreed, heartily.

So after a week she went one afternoon in to town, and returned Mrs. Furnivall's visit, intending in her heart to make her call a first and last one.

Mrs. Furnivall's house was in Grosvenor Street, and Norah was ushered into a very gay and handsome drawing-room, in which she found—not Mrs. Furnivall, but a lady whom she did not know. This lady was sitting writing, and at Norah's entrance she looked up, and showed Norah a very lovely face, surmounted by the smallest and daintiest of widow's caps.

"Mrs. Langton," said the servant as he opened the door, and immediately retired; and as Norah with a little hesitation advanced, the stranger sud-

denly started from her chair, and came eagerly towards her.

"Mrs. Langton, did he say?" she asked, quickly; and in another moment Norah, to her surprise, found both her hands taken and tenderly clasped.

"Oh, I wanted so much to see you! I am so glad! You must let me introduce myself, for I used to know your husband so well," the lady exclaimed. "Ethel Harcourt. Has he never spoken of me? Ethel Harcourt—that was what I used to be; Mrs. Elton I am now."

"Oh!" said Norah, quickly, with a sudden hot-beating at her heart. "Yes, I have heard of Mrs. Elton," she said, quietly, next moment.

"Ah, I thought you must. We used to be such friends." She stopped an instant, and gave a sigh. "Come and sit down, Mrs. Furnivall will be here immediately. How fortunate that I happened to be here to-day, is it not? And you are really Roger Langton's wife?"

She put her hand over Norah's; she set her head a little on one side, and looked into Norah's face with tender violet eyes.

"And—how is he?" she said, earnestly.

"Mr. Langton?" inquired Norah, feeling the blood rushing to her face.

"Yes; is he well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"It is nearly four years since I have seen him."

"Is it?" said Norah.

"Yes, nearly four years: that is a long time. I was hearing all about you from Mrs. Furnivall. I was so much interested."

"You are very good," said Norah—not too ardently perhaps.

"Yes—I had lost sight of so many of my old friends. You know how it happens when you go abroad. Mr. Elton's regiment was at Corfu. It was there—he—died."

"Indeed?" said Norah.

"We had been at Corfu nearly three years. He was thrown from his horse. It was terribly sudden. Of course his death changed everything for me. It was hard to come back to England, but it would have been harder still to have stayed there. I think I did the wisest thing in coming back—I think I did; do not you?" she said, and the beautiful eyes fixed themselves on Norah's again with as earnest an appeal in them as if her own opinion of the course she had pursued was to be decided from henceforward by Mrs. Langton's verdict. Used she to look that way into Roger's face? Norah suddenly thought, with a great pang like a stab.

The pang was so sharp that it made her sick at

heart. With a feeling of intense relief she heard the door open, and saw Mrs. Furnivall come into the room.

"Oh, Susan, I am having such a pleasure!" Mrs. Elton exclaimed, almost before Norah and her hostess had shaken hands. "You know you always say I am a lucky woman, and I did so want to see Roger Langton's wife. You don't mind my calling your husband 'Roger Langton,' do you?" she asked, turning quickly back to Norah. "You see we were such friends, and it isn't easy to break oneself of old habits, though of course I ought to say 'Mr. Langton' now."

"Oh, I daresay Mrs. Langton will excuse you. I've no doubt she knows all about you and her husband," said Mrs. Furnivall, with a light laugh. "These things are never kept secret, are they? Though, to be sure," she went on carelessly, "I shouldn't wonder that *he* might be a little shy of talking much about those old days, perhaps, for really, Mrs. Langton, there used to be the most tremendous flirting between Mrs. Elton and him."

"Now, Susan—Susan!" cried the widow, in a shocked tone, putting up her hands.

"Oh! you can't deny it, you know. You went on till you made him perfectly desperate. I am

sure when he found out that you had given him up——"

"Susan, I won't allow you!—I won't indeed!" the widow exclaimed, and the lovely face was really crimson now all over. "My dear Mrs. Langton," she said, almost apologetically to Norah, "we were a pair of young people, you know (I daresay you have heard everything about it already), and we fancied for a little while that we were in love with one another—that is the whole of it. I liked him, and he liked me, for a time, and then—we each found out that we liked somebody else. There now—that is all. And—and will you tell your husband, when you go home, that you have seen me, and say to him (you will give a message to him for me?—you won't be afraid, will you?—indeed you need not be)—say that I am glad, with all my heart, that he is married, and that I hope—I hope *so much* that he will let himself and you and me all be friends."

She took Norah's hand again as she spoke; she pressed it, and bent forward suddenly and kissed her; and Norah, as she was kissed, felt that the lips that touched hers were trembling, and saw that there were real tears in the beautiful eyes.

"Yes, I will tell him," she said.

With a great effort she turned to Mrs. Furnivall,

and began to talk to her. She kept up a commonplace conversation for ten minutes, and then she rose up, and brought her call to an end.

"I mean to come *very soon* and see you," Mrs. Elton said as she bade her good-bye. "You are to tell your husband so, you know. And tell him I say he is to forget if he was ever angry with me—(you will tell him that—won't you?)—to forget and forgive—for we are all going to be friends." And then she clasped Norah's hand for the last time, and smiled on her once more, and let her go; and the poor soul went out again at the door she had entered so light-heartedly, having eaten of her tree of knowledge, and—like many thousands of women before her—been poisoned by its bitter fruit.

As she drove home it seemed to her that she had no power to think of the thing that she had heard. One blind longing alone filled her—to get back to her husband. How could she know anything until she looked into his face again?

He met her in the hall as she came in, and held out his hand to her with a smile of welcome.

"Well, have you done your duty?" he said.

But the next moment, before she could speak—

"Why, child, are you not well?" he asked her quickly.

She made no answer to either of his questions:

she only took the hand he offered her, and held it fast. He looked at her for a moment; then—

"Come here, dear: what is the matter?" he said.

His tone indicated kindness, surprise, a little uneasiness (uneasiness about her, or about something else: could she tell which?) He took her into the study and closed the door; then stood before her and looked straight into her face.

"Norah, what is wrong?" he said.

"Oh,—nothing," she replied tremulously. "At least, I mean——" And then she stopped; her lips quivered; she looked at him with a sad, wistful look. "Roger, I have brought back a message for you," she said.

"From Mrs. Furnivall?" he asked.

"No,—from that lady you used to know—from —Mrs. Elton."

"Where did you see Mrs. Elton?"

He put his question quickly. The blood had sprung to his face. His voice had a sharp and angry tone in it.

"She was at Mrs. Furnivall's. She was alone in the room when I went in, and she introduced herself and talked to me, and told me—about—you and her; and she said—" Norah was speaking in a strange constrained emotionless way—"she said I

was to tell you that she was coming here, and that she hoped we should all be friends. She said that twice: she said I was to be sure to tell you."

He was standing with his back to the light—he had set himself a few moments ago in that position—so that his wife could not any longer clearly see his face. There was a sudden silence after she had stopped speaking; for a few seconds he stood quite still; then—for the moment, at least, thrusting aside whatever other emotions her speech might have raised in him—with a generous impulse he put his arm about her.

"My poor child," he said, "it was too bad of her to do this to you. Tell me what she said—tell it all to me. It was nothing but her insane vanity that would not let her keep silent. Tell me how it was."

As he put his arm round her she had nestled close to him; her lips were quivering still, her heart still throbbing; but his caress and his kind words were bringing comfort to her.

"Don't blame her so much. I think it was Mrs. Furnivall who said most," she began to tell him. "Mrs. Elton was talking of you when Mrs. Furnivall came in, and then—I don't quite recollect how it was (oh, she is such a dreadful woman!)—she began to joke about you, and she told me——" With

a piteous sudden sob at this point she stopped—instinctively her lips sought his; the sentence broke, and ended in a burst of tears.

"It was her fault far more than Mrs. Elton's. Mrs. Elton was very kind—*too* kind," she said, when she could go on speaking. "I am sure she would not have said what Mrs. Furnivall did. I ought not to mind it so, I know; only it came so suddenly; it was done so coarsely and cruelly——"

"Yes, I know her of old. I can imagine how she would do it," Mr. Langton said, with suppressed fury in his voice. "I was a fool to let you go near her. But you are right, Norah—you ought not to mind it; you must not mind it. What does it all matter now? I was in love once with a woman who—jilted me; that is the whole of it. It would have been better perhaps if I had told you, only I didn't want to vex you; and some men cannot talk about such things——" He was trying to assume a careless tone, but his face had got white as he spoke. "It all took place before I knew you. For me she has been dead and buried these four years past."

Norah had put her bonnet aside; she had laid her head close down upon her husband's shoulder. Ah, was it true? Was he hers now, and not that other woman's? Might she put away her trouble *from her,* and be happy again? She took his hands

after a few moments, and began to kiss them with mute repentance and humility.

"You are very good to me, dear," she said, almost below her breath. "I am afraid I am a jealous woman. But I will try not to be jealous. Of course I know—I have known always—that you had cared for somebody before me. It was only when I came face to face with her so suddenly—the sight of her, and those coarse things Mrs. Furnivall said——"

"That woman shall never come within my doors again!" he broke out vehemently.

"I am glad you say that. I don't think I should like to see her again. But the other one"—timidly—"Mrs. Elton, Roger?"

He made no answer to that question for a few moments; then, in a steady, cold voice——

"Mrs. Elton was always impulsive," he said, half contemptuously. "Probably, if she told you she would come to see you, she meant at the moment to come; but I think I can promise you that you will not be troubled much with her visits. Her husband is no friend of mine."

"But her husband is dead!"

Norah lifted up her face with quick surprise—in time to see the flash and spasm that passed over his.

"Dead!" he ejaculated.

"Did you not know? He died six months ago. Oh, I took it for granted that you knew." Her voice had got a sudden catch in it—a tone of sharp, sudden pain.

They were both silent for more than a minute after this. She was not leaning on him now, and in the start with which he had uttered the last word that he had spoken his arm had dropped from her.

"Yes, he died at Corfu," she said, breaking the silence in a hard, abrupt way, "and she has come back now to live alone in England. I did not ask her if she had any children, or if she cared about her husband's death much. She did not seem as if she cared. I mean, if *you* were to die, I could not talk about you as she did about Mr. Elton. But then she used to love you, not him—so that makes a difference."

Norah had a bitter consciousness that she was making a strange, reckless speech, but she felt as if she could only speak so. She rose up suddenly as she ended it with a kind of shiver. He had said nothing since he had uttered that one word. With a piteous, wistful face she looked at him; would he not speak to her again? Would he let her go and say nothing more?

He noticed her movement, and it seemed to

make him collect himself; but the thing she yearned for, poor soul, it did not make him give her that.

"Are you going upstairs?" he merely said quickly, when he saw that she had risen. And then, with, perhaps, a kind of pity for her — "Yes, rest till dinner-time, dear; you have been upset," he said.

He put his hand upon her shoulder—to turn her to the door, perhaps, but her eyes met his as he would have done that, and I suppose the pitiful appeal in them touched him. He suddenly drew her to his side and kissed her.

"Why do you look so sadly at me, Norah?" he said. And then, after a moment—"Can my wife not trust me?"

She broke at that question into a cry; with a great passion of love and longing she pressed him to her breast.

"Norah, when I married you do you think I did not give that other one up?" he said, after a few moments, in a low voice that was not without signs of agitation in it. "Perhaps I wronged you in not telling you of her. If I did, forgive me. But believe, at least, that she cannot come between us now."

He kissed her again with a grave kiss. Could he have said more to her? Could he have been kinder? She said a few half-inaudible words as she

pressed her cheek to his; she said he was too good to her—he must forgive her—he gave her more than she deserved. Thanking and blessing him she turned away; and then when she got to her room, with a wild inconsistency she sat down and burst into bitter tears. He was so kind to her, she had said. Yes—surely he was kind; but deep down in her heart did she not know that what he had given that other woman had been something beyond kindness—something beyond affection—something beyond trust? Not less than other men's his nature had fire in it, but she who was his wife had never kindled its fire; that other woman had kindled it; and, with a misery and a jealousy too deep for words, Norah sat and thought of the love that that other one had thrown away, which *she* would have died to win.

CHAPTER VI.

"I WANT you to hear what I have been writing presently," Mr. Langton said to Norah when they met at dinner. "I have had rather a good day's work, and have got a troublesome corner turned, I think."

So they went back to the study when dinner was over, and Mr. Langton read his manuscript to her; and then she put on her bonnet, and they took their usual evening walk; and he talked of ordinary things—of the news in the day's papers—of some further work that he was contemplating doing—of certain changes they were thinking of making in their house. He was by natural disposition a reserved and self-contained man—the kind of man who without difficulty can wear a mask. It could scarcely have been but that the thought of Norah's interview with Mrs. Elton must have been in his mind all through these hours, yet he made no reference to it; he was cheerful—kind to his wife—occupied apparently simply with the things of which

he talked. In her there were various signs of preoccupation, but none in him; however much the news she had brought might in reality have startled or agitated him, he was master enough of himself to suppress all outward traces of disturbance.

So the remainder of this day, and several succeeding days, passed with them, to all appearance, as previous ones had done. After the excitement of the first hours had subsided, Norah too had self-control enough to wear her accustomed look again, and healthiness of nature enough to try to subdue her fears. "Why should I torture myself with thinking that she will come between us?" she argued with herself. "He said that she could not, and she —she may be cold-hearted, perhaps, but I do not think she would *try* to make another woman miserable. Perhaps she will be kind and leave us alone. He says she is impulsive. I daresay, when she saw me, she thought she would like to come here, but perhaps she may have gone home and reflected upon it, and seen that it would be wiser and kinder not to come." And so Norah tried to take comfort, and to argue herself into a feeling of security; and she was just beginning, by the time a few quiet days had passed, to let herself steal into a happy hope that her new acquaintance had forgotten the promise she had made, when one afternoon a car-

riage stopped at her door, and the next moment she saw the sight that almost in all the world she least wished to see—she saw, coming up the path to the house, the figure of the fair widow in her flowing weeds.

Norah was sitting at one of the study windows; in a sharp, abrupt voice she said, "There is Mrs. Elton."

She rose up, and turned her face to her husband.

"It is Mrs. Elton, Roger," she repeated in the same tone.

He had dropped his pen awkwardly, and he stooped to pick it up before he spoke.

"Well, you must go to her," he said shortly, after that momentary silence.

"Yes, I know."

And then there was an instant's pause again.

"Will *you* come?"

"I?—no."

She said nothing more, and in another moment would have left the room, but just as she got to the door he stopped her.

"Do you *want* me to come, Norah?"

"I don't know." She looked at him wistfully. "You must judge."

"I don't see the good of it; but yet I should not

like her to think that—that I had any objection to see her."

"Then you think you had better see her?"

"I may come in for five minutes—merely to shake hands with her, perhaps."

"Very well." And then Norah left the room and went to her guest.

She crossed straight from the study to the drawing-room, not lingering a moment by the way, feeling that it was best to make no pause. The widow was standing with her back to the door as Norah opened it, looking out into the garden. At Norah's entrance she turned and advanced to her in what seemed to be her usual fashion with both hands stretched out.

"My dear, I am looking at your lovely garden. You have a perfect Paradise here—it is delightful! Ah, how happy you must be!" she exclaimed; and as she said this, she raised herself on tiptoe and kissed Norah on the cheek. "What does it feel like to be so happy?" she said, and held Norah before her, and looked with earnest eyes into her face, for all the world as if she expected before they so much as sat down to receive a serious answer to her question.

But Norah, as may be supposed, had no intention of giving any answer to her question, either be-

fore becoming seated or afterwards. "Yes, the garden is very pretty," she merely said; and then she drew away her hands, and offered her guest a chair.

"I have been trying to come to you all the week," Mrs. Elton said, "but you know how engagements overwhelm one in London. It is really terrible. I get torn to pieces—literally torn to pieces."

"Do you? We escape that here," Norah said.

"Ah, you have been wise. This lovely seclusion! —what would I not give for it? How like Roger Langton it is to have come here! Do you know, the first moment I saw the house as I drove up I said to myself, 'That must be the place.' You see, I know his taste so well."

"I think Mr. Langton was rather against our living here at first. He was good enough to give in to me, because I wished it." Norah could not deny herself the gratification of making this response.

"Ah, so like him! Dear fellow—always thinking of other people! Mrs. Langton, do you know,"—and the sweet confiding eyes lifted themselves up again to Norah's face—"I shall have so much to tell you about your husband."

She paused a moment—but what could Norah say? I think that a lump had come into Mrs. Langton's throat.

"Yes—all about those dear old days, you know. Ah, when one has passed through a great deal—as *I* have done"—with a fluttering sigh—"how one comes to love the memory of the years when one was young! What would life be without memory!" exclaimed Mrs. Elton in a kind of rapture, and her eyes as they gazed at Norah became suffused with tears.

The next moment she took out her handkerchief and wiped her tears away, and laughed at herself.

"I am a foolish creature—am I not?" she said. "But—oh, my dear, I have such a past to look back upon! So much happiness—so much sorrow! I must not talk about it now. Let us talk instead about your husband. What did he say when you gave my message to him? Now tell me honestly what he said."

"He was surprised," Norah answered quietly.

"Ah, he never quite knew me—not as *I* knew *him*. So he was surprised? But what did he say? What did he think?"

"He will come in presently; you had better ask himself," Norah said.

"That means he said something a little—a little—a little angrily? Ah, you dear young wife, trying to screen him in this pretty way! Well, you shan't

be pressed—you shan't be made to say a word against him. I understand it all so well.—How I remember his little spurts of temper!—the little explosion there would be at first when a thing vexed him, and then how gradually he would come round, —and how one had to smoothe his ruffled feathers softly,—and stroke him down,—and——"

"I think, if you will let me, I will tell Mr. Langton to come in and see you," Norah said abruptly, rising up and interrupting the other's sentence.

The blood was tingling in her veins; she felt that she could bear anything better than to sit still like this, and go on listening to Mrs. Elton's peculiar reminiscences.

"Will you tell him I am here? Ah, if it would not disturb him," exclaimed the widow, "it would be such a pleasure to see him!" And then Norah went from the room and called her husband.

"Roger, I wish you would come," she said. "It will be easier for me if you will."

Mr. Langton looked at her quickly, but asked no question. After a moment—"Very well," he merely said, and rose from his seat, and they went to the drawing-room together.

He made some careless remark as they crossed the hall. "Those flowers want changing," he said, looking at some geraniums in a stand. She looked

at them too, but returned no answer. The next moment he had opened the door, and had followed her into the room.

Mrs. Elton rose as they entered, and came forward in silence, with a timid, deprecating look on her fair face. She fixed her beautiful eyes on Mr. Langton; she half extended her hand—then almost drew it back as if afraid.

"Not enemies?" she said suddenly, in a low appealing voice.

"How do you do?" he quietly asked, and gave his hand to her.

"I am very well;—but—not enemies?" she repeated beseechingly, still gazing in his face; and this time he could not but reply to her.

"Enemies?—no, certainly not," he said, half-impatiently; and then with a little sigh, apparently of relief, her lips broke into a smile.

The next moment he had disengaged his hand (it seemed to Norah that, left to herself, Mrs. Elton would have gone on holding it—lost, probably, in recollections of the past), and they sat down.

"It is so sweet to me to see you here—so sweet," she said next moment, almost with a tremor in her voice. "I have been telling your dear wife how I have fallen in love with this place."

"My wife and I like the place, but I should

scarcely have thought it would have suited your taste," he replied, with a half laugh, and—Norah thought uneasily—an almost audible tone of contempt.

"Ah, yes, I know—you think I only care for living in towns—you think I care for nothing but excitement,"—with an air of meek submission to his rebuke; "and I don't say but what that was true of me long ago; but—do you think that time makes no change in one?—that I have not learnt to despise some things I cared for once?—and to—to care for some"—in a low voice—"that I once did not know how to value?"

She lifted up her eloquent eyes to his face again at these last words, but he neither looked at her, nor replied to her question.

"We had a visit the other day from poor Forrester," he merely said, abruptly. "I was sorry to see him looking so ill. His wife's death, I am afraid, has aged him a good deal."

"Ah, yes, dear old man—is it not sad? Such a lonely life he leads now! I go and see him sometimes. He likes me to sit and chat to him; it brightens him up a little. He was always fond of me, you know."

"Yes, he was fond of you."

"Just like a father to me. And I am sure, for

my part, I loved him better than his own daughter did. I am afraid he has not very much comfort in Susan."

"I daresay not. I don't think I should have much comfort in her if she were *my* daughter."

"Ah, you never liked her. How severe you used to be! Mrs. Langton, your husband used to be dreadful about poor Susan Forrester. Such things as he has said to me about her!"

"I think your memory exaggerates. I never found her attractive—that was all."

"Oh! no, no—excuse me—that was *not* all. You used to neglect her shamefully. I have known you not speak a dozen words to her through the whole of an evening."

"Well, possibly," in a tone of indifference. "I don't profess to remember."

"No, men don't remember such trifles. It is only foolish women who do—who have nothing great to think about. And—you have been busy since we met last? You have written books? Ah! it is delightful to be able to write books—it is such a resource! I tried once to read one of yours, do you know, but——"

"But you found it too dry, I have no doubt," he said, with a short laugh.

"No, no, not dry; I thought it beautiful, only—

oh, so much above me! If I could have understood it I should have liked to go on with it so much. Do you remember once reading to me an article that you had written, and making me understand it?"

Poor Norah, glancing at her husband, saw him wince at the widow's question; he let a moment pass before he answered it.

"I remember reading some article to you," he said, after that short silence, "but I am not prepared to say that you understood it."

"Oh, that is very severe!" and Mrs. Elton deprecatingly raised her hands. "Mrs. Langton, is he not terribly severe? I don't believe he would be willing to allow that I have any brains at all."

"Pardon me, I never doubted that you had *brains* enough," he said, quickly, in a marked tone; and then all at once there was a pause; the colour had come into the widow's face—something that surely was tears had started into her eyes. Norah saw that what her husband said had given her pain, and with a quick, generous desire to cover her annoyance she began to speak.

"I don't think any woman without a special training could quite understand Mr. Langton's books," she said. "I daresay neither of us could get much good from reading them unless he helped us."

"But he *won't* help *me*, you see!" said the widow

half comically. She laughed her emotion or her vexation away; she rose up shaking her head at Mr. Langton. "You are very hard upon me," she said. "He always *was* hard, Mrs. Langton. I used to be dreadfully afraid of him. But *you* will be my friend,—won't you?" and she turned a look on Norah that seemed half in earnest, half in jest. "You will stand up for me if he begins to say bad things about me when my back is turned? Do you know" —in a sudden tone of ingenuous confession—"people have a dreadful way of abusing me!—I don't mean all people—some are foolish the—the other way; but that is just what strikes me as so strange!—I mean the extremes they fall into. Everybody thinks too well of me, or too ill—as if I were all either black or white, and I am *sure* I am not all white and—I don't think I am black altogether. Now, do you? *Do* you, Mrs. Langton?" she said, and she smiled her sweetest smile into Norah's face.

"Certainly not. Why should I?" Norah answered.

She had retreated a step as Mrs. Elton had pressed near to her. She did not dislike this woman; somehow, in spite of all the pain she caused her, she *could* not dislike her, but yet she felt involuntarily that she would rather not be taken into her arms *again.* "I don't think she is bad—I don't think she

means ill, but why can she not leave me alone?" was the main thought in her mind.

"I was sure you would say that! You have such a true face," cried the widow with enthusiasm. "My dear, I am certain we are going to be friends. Come and see me soon. Come and spend a long morning with me. Now, you will do that—will you not?"

"I will come and see you, of course," Norah said.

"Ah, but you must make a long visit. Now, I insist—a long visit! There—I won't hear a word against it—not a word!" cried Mrs. Elton, putting her hands to her ears, and laughingly hurrying to the door.

And then, as she would hear nothing more, Norah held her peace.

Mr. Langton walked with Mrs. Elton to her carriage. The house stood within a walled garden, and there was a walk of thirty yards or so from the hall-door to the outer gate. Norah, standing at the drawing-room window, watched the two figures as side by side they traversed these thirty yards—watched them too, poor soul, as presently when they had reached the gate they both stood still. The trees half concealed them then. She could only see that they remained together; she could only know that one minute and another and then another

passed,—till she turned away at last from the window, saying to herself that she would not be a spy upon them—feeling, though she did not say it, that she was sick at heart.

Mr. Longton had begun to walk by his visitor's side in silence, but she did not let him remain in silence long.

"Oh, this has been such a pleasure to me!" she exclaimed before they had taken a dozen steps. "To see you settled here—with that sweet woman for your wife—in such a perfect house—with everything to make you happy. I can't tell you the good it has done me! I think she is beautiful—quite beautiful; and altogether the sight of you both—the thought of the life you lead——! Oh, Mr. Langton, happiness and unhappiness are not so unequally divided after all. I had my share of good early, and you have yours now, when for me—all the world—has become —desolate!"

"I was very much shocked to hear of your husband's death," Mr. Langton said gravely, after a moment or two's awkward silence.

"Ah yes—so sudden. It was terrible. While he lived I had at least a home, but now—— Oh, Roger Langton, the mistakes we make—the mistakes we make!" cried the widow, in a voice almost broken with a sob.

"Yes—we all make many mistakes," he said bitterly. "Some of us waste years of our lives in making them."

"You have not forgiven me yet! Will you never forgive me?" They had got to the outer door now, and she stood still before him, and looked up suddenly in his face. "I have longed so often to ask you. If you only knew how I have longed! Won't you forgive me?—when I beg you?—when you can afford it so well now?—you who are so happy?"

"I am *not* happy!" he cried, with a great flash in his eyes; and then he restrained himself—perhaps he thought of Norah.

"Ah! you only say that to hurt me. I know you don't mean me to believe it. I know you will go back in another minute into your house, and thank God that you have got out of all those old troubled waters. You will stand in another minute by that sweet woman's side, and thank God that you have such a companion. I know you will do this. And I am glad—do you not think I am glad?—that it should be so. Yes, *I* shall go home and thank God too. I shall go back to my lonely house, and—think of you."

The tears had overflowed the widow's eyes, and were rolling down her cheeks. She turned her face

away, and covered it for a moment with her handkerchief.

"What an actress you are still!" he cried, with sudden irrepressible contempt and passion.

"An actress!" The beautiful eyes flashed up at him in a moment, all ablaze with indignation; then, after an instant, their expression changed. "Ah, I have no right to be angry! I *was* an actress once," she said mournfully, "but that was when I was a happy girl. I had never known what trouble was then. Yes, I used to act once, I suppose, but now——" She clasped her hands with a deprecating gesture. "What should I gain now by not being true?" she suddenly began to say rapidly. "Do you not know how I have suffered since I saw you last? Do you think I have been happy during these four years? My husband—I ought not to say it, I daresay, but you rouse me, you *make* me say it—my husband was a drunkard and a fool. What kind of a life do you think I lived with him? Try to imagine me tied to such a man. And I gave up *you* for him! If I have repented a thousand times—yes, a thousand and a thousand times—need you find it hard to believe? If I come back now, and find you happy, and—and thank God that your life has not been shipwrecked too, do I deserve nothing from you but to be called —an actress? Ah! you are a hard man, Roger

Langton—you are a hard man; you always were. You cannot forgive me, and I—I have no right to complain, I suppose. It is all just. I have deserved it all, I know."

She turned from him with a sob in her voice. She put her hand upon the lock of the door, and then she suddenly paused, and looked beseechingly in his face again.

"Will you not say one kind word to me,—just one, before I go? Will you not be generous, and let me go away happy? If you cannot quite forgive me yet, at least can you not tell me that you will try? Can you not do that?" she said.

"You seem to think that forgiveness is a very easy thing," he began to answer, impetuously; then he stopped himself; he let his eyes fall to the ground. "I will try to forgive you," he said, in an altered tone.

"Ah, that is kind of you. God bless you!" she exclaimed. "Now I shall go home comforted. And you will let your wife come and see me?" She asked this eagerly. "And you will come—some day—and see me—yourself?"—in a pleading voice.

"No, I had better not come," he replied gravely.

"Oh, you must not say that! Why should you say it? Say you will come—when you have forgiven me?" she entreated. "Yes, just say that, and I will

go, and ask nothing more. When you have forgiven me? It won't do you any harm to promise that."

And then, at last, he gave his promise, and she opened the gate.

Though Norah had left the window, she heard when Mrs. Elton's carriage drove away, and she waited with an anxious heart for her husband to come back into the house. But he did not come. She saw him after a minute or two in a distant part of the garden, and she longed to go and join him, but yet she had not courage to go. She had been trying to school herself. She had been saying, "It is quite natural that they should have a great deal to say to one another. How could it be otherwise? It would be false in them to pretend that they had no feeling in meeting again; and they could not talk of anything that was past before me." She had been saying this to herself, but, though she said it, it had not made the long minutes while they had stood together easier for her to bear. She had longed to know what they were saying with a passionate longing. She wanted to go to her husband now, but she was afraid to go. On any other day, how quickly and naturally she would have joined him, sure of a kind if a quiet welcome from him! but now she hesitated and lingered, and did not dare to go.

She let more than a quarter of an hour pass before she went at last and joined him. As she came up to him, he was standing beside a rose-bush, busying himself with its flowers.

"Look at all these buds, Norah. We shall have a splendid show of autumn roses," he said quietly, as she came near.

"Yes, they promise to be fine, I think," she answered.

And then they talked for five minutes about the flowers, before, with a little touch of nervousness in her voice, she said abruptly—

"Roger, is Mrs. Elton like what she used to be? —I mean, was she as lovely as she is now when you knew her before?"

"She was always very beautiful," he answered coldly.

"And—very fascinating, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"It was—it was no wonder you were fond of her." She said this very timidly.

He made no answer; after a few seconds he merely said—

"You won't be able to get off going to see her. She seems very eager about it."

"Did she say so to you?"

"Yes, she pressed it very much. She professes

to have taken a great liking to you. I daresay she really has. And—you seem rather to like her?"—interrogatively.

"Do you think I do?" There was a curious wistfulness in Norah's voice. "I don't know—I can't tell yet. I think I would dislike her if I could, for I am afraid of her, you know" (this was said hurriedly, with a sudden, perhaps an unwise impulse); "and yet I don't think I do dislike her."

"You have no cause to be afraid of her," he answered gravely.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Norah," he said quickly and half angrily, "do not take fancies into your head. Whatever Mrs. Elton may have been to me once, you are my wife now. Let that be enough for you."

She was silent for a minute or two; after that she only said deprecatingly—

"Dear, I am afraid sometimes of being too happy. If I seem to be unreasonable, I think it all comes from that."

"One of the most baseless fears in all this world, Norah, is the fear of being too happy. If you are wise, you will take all the happiness you can get. Your lot will be very unlike the common one if you find you have more than enough."

She opened her lips to reply to him, but she

checked herself before the words came. He did not understand her; let her keep silent,—let her be content with what he had said, she thought. So presently she tried to put her trouble away from her —that vague fear of the little cloud no bigger than a man's hand—and, while she could, to enjoy that happiness of which her husband, in his sad philosophy, told her she was so little likely to have too much.

CHAPTER VII.

WAS it only in Norah's imagination that during the days which followed this one there was a certain change in her husband? He seemed to her to have fits of abstraction; often, when he talked, she thought he did it with an effort; he was kind to her, yet his kindness appeared less spontaneous; he seemed to care less to have her with him. "Is it that woman who has come between us?" Norah thought to herself a thousand times; but she put no questions to him, and made no complaints.

After ten days or so had gone by, he said to her suddenly one morning, "When are you going to make your call on Mrs. Elton?"

She flushed a little when he asked her that.

"I don't know. Need I be in a hurry?" she said.

"It won't do to forget it," he answered—"that is all I mean."

"Forget it!—no," she said. "I am not likely to do that."

And then, the same afternoon, she went to town and made her visit. "He wants me to go, I suppose," she thought to herself.

"I can drive in and call to-day, if you like," she said to him. And then, after a moment's hesitation, "Will you come, Roger?"

"No—you know I make no calls," he answered.

So she said no more, but went alone.

When she came back from her visit, there was a brighter look on her face than it had worn for some days.

"I found her just going out of town," she told her husband cheerfully. "She is going to be away all August and September, she says. I—I am glad, on the whole, I went to-day, though I had almost nothing to do with her, for there were half a dozen other people there."

He gave a short sudden laugh when Norah said this. "That was always the way with her—she always had a crowd round her," he said with a half sneer.

"Yes, she told me that she lives in a perpetual whirl, and I suppose she does; but she is going away now for two months," Norah repeated, in perhaps an unconscious tone of self-congratulation.

And, in fact, that evening she felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders; her courage came

back to her, her heart felt almost light again. Her husband's absorption during these last ten days had made her shy of him, but to-night, with or without reason, a feeling of self-confidence began to return to her.

"Roger, I am glad *we* are not going away anywhere," she said to him suddenly during the evening. "We shall have a quiet pleasant autumn. You won't be dull here, will you," and she looked into his face wistfully, "with nobody but me?"

"I should rather put that question to you, Norah," he replied.

But at that she gave a little sudden laugh.

"No, you shouldn't put that question to me, because I am only a woman," she said quickly, "and to be where you are is the only thing I want. You know that. It is only your content, not mine, that there can be any doubt about."

"You need not have any doubt about *my* content," he answered quietly. "*I* certainly have no desire to move from here."

"Then we are both satisfied," she said.

"So it seems." But his tone was cold enough to chill her.

She went out with him that evening, and they had a long walk till it was almost dark. He was

very silent for part of the way; then he began to discuss some public question, and talked of that almost till they reached home again. I am afraid, if she had had her choice, she would have liked him to talk to her about some different thing—something more personal, perhaps, and less instructive; but since she had been Mr. Langton's wife she had learnt how to resign a good many of her own wishes, and often, when she was hungry, to be satisfied with scanty enough meals. Perhaps by doling out food to her so charily, he kept her longing for it keen. Sometimes, half sadly, half in jest, she used to think so to herself.

This evening it was almost as if she might have been merely some common friend that he was talking to, and not his wife. She thought this as they walked on together, and as she listened to him. He was discussing the last measure of the Ministry, and the wisdom of their Indian policy, and she was trying to listen, and to follow his argument, knowing all the while that with half her heart—with more than half her heart—she was thinking of other things. For what were all the most important affairs of the nation to her, compared with one word of love from him? She might have heard to-night that our Indian Empire was lost, and I am afraid the news would not have moved her as she might

have been moved by one sentence (such as she longed for) from his lips.

But she walked by his side, and listened, and held her peace. Only when they came back to the house, and the lamp was lighted, and he had taken up a book—after she had moved about the room for a few minutes, setting one or two things in order, putting away some work—did she come at last to his side, and lay her hand on his.

"I wonder what we shall do, dear, when the long winter evenings come," she said. "We shall have so many hours to sit here by the fire."

"Are you getting afraid of the prospect of them?" he asked her, with a laugh. He put his book down for a moment, and looked up to her cheerfully enough.

"No; I am only afraid of them coming too quickly. I want time to stand still," she said.

"You would soon get tired of that, Norah. In the course of a month or two, I should say."

"Should I, do you think? I do not believe it."

"Everybody tires of monotony. All mankind—and even all womankind too—wants change. You don't expect to be different from all the world, do you?" And then he smiled, and with rather tender eyes put his hand upon her hair. "What are you

going to do?" he said next moment. "Sit down, and I will read something to you."

So then she got her work, and he took up his book again, and read aloud.

It was impossible but that, during the weeks that came after this, Norah should think a great deal of Mrs. Elton, and of what likelihood there was, when the widow should come back to town, that she would try to press her acquaintance on them; but, as she thought, on the whole the fears that had oppressed her at first grew less. "She is too busy—her life is too full for her to find time to come often here," she said to herself. "It was only a sudden freak, I daresay, that made her come at all; for what can I ever be to her?—or what can Roger be now? If I remain passive, perhaps we shall not be troubled much with her, for you cannot make an intimacy when only one side is willing to be intimate. Perhaps it will all die out again as suddenly as it has begun, and then, if it does, please God no harm will have been done. Possibly even it was well that he should have seen her once again, for one's ideal, I suppose, so seldom bears coming back to; and lovely as she is, it seems to me as if she must offend his taste sometimes now. So much about her is overdone; she is so little simple. Though the sight of her of course

agitated him at first, may it not be possible that in his heart he feels that now?"

In this way Norah tried to comfort herself; and thus gradually, as the weeks passed on, she let that peace return to her which had been for the moment so rudely shaken.

And so the autumn came, and the leaves fell round them. Not only August and September, but October too went by, and they saw and heard no more of Mrs. Elton; until at last one November evening, when Norah had been waiting for her husband's return from town, wondering a little why he was so long in coming, on his arrival, or, rather, half an hour after he arrived, he said to her suddenly (with a poor affectation, that gave a subtle pang to her, of having forgotten at once to tell her)—

"Oh, by the way, I met Mrs. Elton in Waterloo Place."

Her heart gave an involuntary bound; she lifted her eyes up to him quickly.

"Did you speak to her?" she asked.

"Yes—she was coming out of some shop—Howell and James's, I think—and saw me. Her carriage was there, and she insisted on driving me as far as Brook Street."

"Oh!"

And then there was an abrupt silence again. Norah longed to ask him something more; perhaps he half desired to tell her something more, or felt, at least, that there was something more he ought to tell; but yet neither of them spoke, till after several moments he said carelessly,

"She talks about wanting very much to see you again. She sent all kinds of messages and apologies to you about having been too busy to call."

"Oh, she need not have done that," Norah answered, quickly; and then nothing more was said, and he began to speak of something else.

But, perhaps, when it was too late, he was sorry that he had said nothing more, and went on eating his dinner with an uneasy consciousness of having been a coward; for if he had told no lie to Norah he had hidden a good deal of the truth from her, and he had a keen enough feeling of honour in him not to love himself the better for having done that.

In reality what had passed between him and Mrs. Elton was this:

She had been coming out of Howell and James's just as he was passing the shop, and at the same instant they saw one another, and she greeted him with an eager welcome.

"Oh, I am so glad! How are you? Isn't it

nice to meet you like this? Tell me where you are going? Now *I* am on my way home, and I am sure you are going that way too," she exclaimed all in a breath, while her hand was still in his.

"I am going to walk back to Highgate," he replied.

"Then you must let me drive you as far as Brook Street. Oh, you must! I want to talk to you, and it is too cold to stand still. Coachman, home. Now you see it won't delay you a bit; it will do just the reverse. Won't it?" she said, looking with the sweetest smile into his face, as, half reluctantly, half willingly, he stepped into the carriage after her.

"Yes—of course you will take me over so much of the ground more quickly," he said.

"I should like to go all the way home with you, and call on Mrs. Langton, only that I have been shopping for these last two hours, and I am so tired. But I mean to come and see her *very* soon. Mind you tell her so. I am longing so to see her. Is she *quite* well?"

"Yes, quite well," he said.

"I have thought so often of that dear little Paradise of yours. What a sweet house it is! And *you go on living* your beautiful idyllic life in it?"

"I was not aware that I led an idyllic life." He said this with a half scornful laugh.

"Oh, yes, you do. At least, I mean, that is what it seemed to me. Quite idyllic. I have thought of it a hundred times. You don't know how refreshing it is to me to picture you in that peaceful place. You, in the midst of your books—and that lovely wife, with her sweet face. Ah, it must be delightful! And your work—how is it getting on? You will tell me, won't you?" she said.

"There is very little to tell. It is not getting on fast."

"Fast! No—of course such books as yours could not be written fast. But—are you satisfied?"

"Do you think it likely that I should be?"

"Ah, well—I don't know—I am such a foolish woman, you see—and it seems to me that to be able to write at all upon such subjects as you do is so wonderful. But—oh, yes, I can believe you are not satisfied. It is only small people who are content. The great ones are always pressing on, and soaring higher, and yet never reaching what they think perfection."

And, subdued by the sublimity of this thought, Mrs. Elton pressed her delicately gloved hands to-

gether, and sank for about the space of six seconds into silence.

It was only a short way to Brook Street. As they arrived there, and the carriage drew up before her house, she turned her face eagerly to Mr. Langton.

"You will come in?—just for five minutes? Oh, yes—do come in!" she exclaimed.

"Not to-day," he said.

He opened the door and alighted, and then stood waiting to hand her out, but she sat still, leaning forward, and looking almost like a pleading child in his face.

"But if you don't come in now you won't come at all—and you said you would come. I shall have no chance unless you come now. Why won't you?—I ask it—and you said you would?"

"It is too late. My wife will be looking for me at home," he answered.

"But she has you all day long. Can't she spare you for one little half-hour? Ah, Roger Langton, your old friends care for you more than you care for them!"

"That is not true," he said.

"Then show one of them that you care a little—little bit for her still. Come in—just for one quarter *of an hour?*"

And at last he yielded in silence, and went in.

She ran upstairs, full of animation, and delighted like a child with her victory—with all her assumed or imagined fatigue gone. She brought him to her drawing-room, and placed him in one of her luxurious easy chairs, and called for tea, and poured it out for him; and while he drank it she talked to him about fifty things, mingling sense and nonsense, fun and sentiment, all together. She sat before him, making play at him with her beautiful eyes—setting herself to charm him again as deliberately, and with as little conscience, as she had set herself to do it half a dozen years ago. She meant no harm, she would have said, if anyone had charged her with doing an unjustifiable thing; in this world one must get amusement—and if one has been born a coquette how is it possible to keep from flirting? This was the excuse for her misdeeds that Ethel Harcourt had put forward all her life. How could she help doing what people called mischief, when she had been brought into the world with such an irresistible instinct for doing it?

She talked to Mr. Langton about the present and the past—about days that were gone, and days to come,—about herself and him; and she would have talked of Norah too, and discussed Norah's character with her husband, only that he stopped

her there, and turned the conversation into another channel. When about half an hour had passed he tried to leave her, but she would not let him. She had a thousand more things to say, she exclaimed. It was only five o'clock. When did he dine? Not till half-past six? Then why should he go yet—when they had not had a talk together for such a long, long time? He had got up, and put out his hand to bid her good-bye, and in her eagerness to detain him she had taken and was holding it.

"Sit down again. Ah, you *must* sit down. Just for another half hour," she pleaded. "You know, I can't be sure when you will come back. Perhaps you won't come back for months,—and—do you not think this is a great pleasure to me?" she said all at once, with a little tremor in her voice.

And then—he sat down again. If he had been a stronger man he would not have done it, but he was not strong.

It was six o'clock when he left the house at last, and he hailed the first cab he saw and drove home. He had left himself no time to walk. She had been talking to him about a hundred things; during the last half-hour of his visit she had been telling him about her husband and her married life, and at one point of her narrative she had burst suddenly into tears. She had clasped her hands over her face and

sobbed before him, and then all at once had lifted up her head and looked at him with swimming eyes.

"This is the kind of life I have led! Think of it!" she cried. "I might have been — what you know, and I chose this instead! Are you not sorry for me? Remember the old days, and that will make you pity me, I used to think sometimes that if you knew——But it was much better that you did not know—much, much better. I saw your marriage in the paper." She said this softly. "It was just after my husband died—the month after he died. That was strange, was it not? I—I cried when I saw the announcement first. Not that I wanted things to be different. Oh no—no! I was glad, not sorry. It was only that—just at first—it brought so many things back. That was all. I was glad immediately. Yes—and I am glad now—quite, quite glad. We shall be friends again —shall we not?— and I shall love your wife too, I know,—and presently, when time has made us all old and stoical——"

She stopped—her voice broke—she gave a sob—and turned away her face. She wept for a few moments, while he stood silent beside her; and then, wiping her eyes, looked at him again with a smile breaking through her tears.

"And now you are going home?" she said.

"Well—yes—go home,—and thank you for having given this hour to me. Thank you very, very much. Some joy is so like sorrow, you know—and I have been very happy, though I have been crying. It does one good sometimes to cry,—and it does me good—it keeps my heart warm—it makes me young again to see an old friend's face. So now go home, and—you will come again, I know. You will come again, will you not?" she said.

And then he promised that he would come again; and in a minute afterwards he found himself once more in the streets, with the church clocks striking six.

It was not possible that Mr. Langton could have entered into much description of this interview to Norah, but after he had told her that Mrs. Elton had driven him to Brook Street, and then had left the subject and begun to talk of something else, at least he was honest enough to despise himself that he had told her nothing more. But he had let the moment slip, afterwards he could not do it.

It was a November evening, and after dinner he sat reading by the fire. To Norah, at any time when he spoke to her, he was very gentle, but he seemed to her to be tired, and to have his thoughts elsewhere. "What have you been doing all day? You have not told me," he roused himself to say to her

once; and when he said that she began to give him the history of her day; but though she gave it she did it shyly, with an instinctive consciousness that his heart was far away from her. Often when she talked to him she could talk sweetly enough: when he was affectionate to her and cared to listen she had pretty ways of telling things; when she was happy she could be bright and playful; but she felt to-night that he did not care to listen to her, and his indifference made her timid. Long ago she had said to him one day, half in jest—"I often think I am like an instrument that your fingers have to tune. If you don't tune the strings rightly the music all goes wrong." Perhaps she was thinking this to-night.

She said to him after a time—"I suppose we are both tired. You were a long while in town, and —I had not much to tire me here; but—" she gave a little half sad laugh—"when *you* are worn out, it seems to me that *I* get weary too. Dear"—and all at once, with a wistful, yearning look, she went to him, and stole her arm about his neck—"Dear," she said quickly, "I wish you had a brighter wife."

"Why should you say that?" he quietly asked.

"Because you are so often grave, and grave people ought to have bright companions, I am afraid."

"And living with me, you mean, makes you dull?"

"Roger!" she exclaimed.

"You seem to me to mean that."

"But you know in your heart that I do not mean it. I was thinking of you, not of myself."

"My poor child, that is what you are doing always, it seems to me."

"Thinking of you? Well, if I am, what better thing have I to do?"

"You are a faithful woman, Norah."

"Yes; if faithfulness were all you wanted in me, I suppose I should satisfy you there."

She spoke quietly, but with a sudden sadness in her voice.

"You ought not to speak of not satisfying me, Norah. Don't let us find fault with one another. The only fault you might really find is, that I am not good enough for you," he said.

He pressed her hand for a moment, and then rose up. He meant what he had said in a deeper sense than she dreamt he meant it; but, if she had known how true he felt his words to be, that knowledge, I am afraid, would not have done much to make her heart light.

CHAPTER VIII.

"We cannot see much of Mrs. Elton," Norah had said to herself, "for she will not care to come here often, and I will not go to her;" but Norah was wrong; for it was surprising, during the next six months, how often Mrs. Elton found time to make her way to Highgate. Nor did she pay her visits to Norah with any unkind feeling towards her, but quite, indeed, with the reverse of that, for there was no malice in the widow's nature, and if she laid herself out to charm Mr. Langton again, she did it without the slightest wish by that proceeding to cause any annoyance to his wife. She only, like many other self-centred people, had a simple way of working out her own little schemes, and following her own amusements, with a most convenient blindness to the effect they produced on the feelings of those around her.

So she used to come to Highgate, and, having her head full of something else than Norah, would be hardly so much indifferent to, as quite uncon-

scious of, Norah's coldness. She was so accustomed to charm many people that she had got the habit—like many fascinating women—of assuming that she charmed everybody. If Mrs. Langton was cold, perhaps she thought that was only Mrs. Langton's natural manner; some people are always cold, and Norah's style was the grave and stately.

"I do admire it so!" she would exclaim enthusiastically to Mr. Langton. "What a grand kind of face she has! I sit and look at her sometimes till—till I feel quite elevated. Now, *isn't* she beautiful?" and she would raise her own lovely eyes up to him with an appealing look in them, as if she were beseeching him not to deny a truth so creditable to his wife, and would go on praising Norah till perhaps he would interrupt her with some abrupt inquiry or remark upon quite a different subject, and then—"Ah, poor fellow, he can't bear to speak about her!" she would think complacently to herself, and would sigh, and say—what a pity it was! and persuade herself that she felt quite tenderly to Norah, whom her husband (it was so sadly evident) had married out of pique, and who—poor dear soul!—clearly had not the least idea how to manage him. "I am sure I am sorry for her with all my heart," she would say quite pathetically, "and if there was anything I could possibly do to help her—!" And

then, fired with this benevolent desire, what could be more natural than that she should revolve all kinds of pleasant plans in her mind, and quickly come to the conclusion that—Norah knowing so little how to manage her husband—it would be only kind for *her* to manage him now and then, and give the poor man a little variety and amusement. "I am afraid he gets wonderfully little except from me," she would say laughingly to herself, in perfect honesty and good faith, almost persuading herself that she was acting the part of a good angel to the family, and keeping the domestic atmosphere bright and sweet.

She used nearly always to contrive to see Mr. Langton during the visits that she paid to Highgate. She would sit for a time contentedly talking to Norah, and then if he did not come in she would manage to send a message to him. She was always prepared with some question that she wanted to ask him, and the answer to which it was necessary for her to have on the spot; and so Norah with a bitter heart would have to go to the study and summon him. He was ready enough to be summoned; his wife knew that. She had come to this knowledge very quickly.

"Roger, I wish Mrs. Elton would not come here," she had said once, earnestly and frankly, to him.

"I do not care for her; she only disturbs us both. Why should she come?"

But he had spoken to her almost angrily when she said this.

"I cannot see why she should not come if she likes to do it," he had said. "It seems to me, Norah, that she shows more generosity in coming than you do in wanting to keep her away."

And then—perhaps because his reproach pained her so—perhaps because she was so unused ever to argue with him that she could not bear to set up her own will in opposition to his—she became silent, and, with a sad—possibly at moments with an indignant—obedience, submitted to the widow's visits. "If I can only hold him by coercion what is the use of holding him?" she began to think to herself. "If she did not come here I suppose now he would go to her, so I may as well be quiet. I suppose many other women have had to bear this, and I should only be called jealous and laughed at if I complained of it." And so she held her tongue; but yet she found the thing that was beginning to be laid upon her very hard to bear.

It was not that her husband was not kind to her, for he was very kind; except on rare occasions he had never been gentler to her than he was during this winter; he was often even more than usually

tender to her, as if his conscience troubled him, and he tried to silence it by making her more than ever his companion in all he did. As far as outward acts went she had no cause of complaint against him; it was not in those—it was only in the feeling that moved him—that the fault lay.

During these months — oftener, perhaps, than Norah knew—he used to go to the widow's house in Brook Street. She had fallen into the habit of frequently giving him commissions to execute for her. Some small service or other for her was always needed to be done, and whom could she so readily find to employ in such offices as Roger Langton? "You know all about everything," she would say to him, with one of her flattering smiles. "Now you will find out this thing for me,—or get me this,—or this,—will you not, and not think me a terrible bore?" It was surprising what a number of small requirements she seemed to have always ready at a moment's notice to be put into words. "Let me see, is there anything I want?" she would say sometimes, hesitating and at fault for an instant, but for an instant only. "Oh, yes, I knew there was something!" she would exclaim in another second; and then, with a face as earnest as if she were putting the affairs of the nation into his hands, she would beg Mr. Langton to execute some immaterial pur-

chase for her, or to get some book from Mudie's, of which she never meant to read a word.

In this way—with no small amount of communication between Highgate and Brook Street—the winter passed. But if Norah had thought that she had anything to endure from the widow during these months, a time soon came when she looked back upon them enviously and longingly, for one May evening—descending upon her very much like a thunderbolt—this letter was put into her hands from Mrs. Elton:—

"MY DEAREST MRS. LANGTON," (the widow wrote,)

"I am in a state of despair! I was out this afternoon, and came home an hour ago to find—my house on fire! I don't mean to say it is burnt down—happily the flames have been extinguished, without serious damage—but, oh! if you could see the confusion round me at this moment—curtains and carpets ruined, mirrors cracked, furniture broken! I have not a room fit to sit down in, and must fly! Am I wrong, dear friend, in thinking that you will take a poor houseless creature in?—just for a few days, till chaos is dispersed and order brought back again?

"I send this note before me that I may not

startle you *too* much, but I feel so sure of what your hospitable heart will say to my petition, that I will follow my messenger in an hour, without waiting for your answer.

"I have received such a shock, and feel so nervous still, that I am eager to get away out of sight of the house, or else I would stand on more ceremony, and wait till morning before I came to you; but you don't care about ceremony, do you? You are too good and kind, I know, to care. I am more afraid of your husband than of you. Pray take my part if he says I am a bold presuming woman."

The colour came to Norah's face as she read this letter. Mr. Langton was with her when she received it, and when she had finished reading it she gave it to him without a word. Neither of them spoke till after he had folded it up, and put it back into its envelope.

"She gives us no choice in the matter," Norah said coldly then (she was the first to break the silence).

"No. However, any way, of course we could not refuse," he said.

"So she seems to think. But——" Norah was speaking as if with difficulty, but firmly enough (she was not roused often to express any opinion of Mrs. Elton or her proceedings, yet she could and did

speak plainly about her sometimes)—"But I think she had hardly the right to do this."

"I don't see what objection you need have to her doing it."

"Do you not?" A great wistfulness and sadness came into Mrs. Langton's voice. She looked full at her husband for a moment; then, "Do you really mean that you think it unreasonable in me not to care to have Mrs. Elton staying here?" she said.

He rose up from his chair impatiently without answering her. He went to the fire, and, standing looking into it, was silent for almost a minute before at last he said abruptly, not turning to her, but with his back to her—

"For God's sake, Norah, don't grow into a jealous woman!"

"Let me return that request. For God's sake, Roger"—her voice was trembling, though she tried hard to steady it—"don't give me cause to be jealous."

"If you are so foolish as to take offence at what you never ought to take offence at—" he began, passionately; but suddenly she rose and went to him, and stopped his speaking.

"Roger, don't let us be angry with one another," she said, in a tone of entreaty. "She is coming, and whether we would have wished to help it or

not, we cannot help it. Let us receive her, and not quarrel about her."

"I think the inclination to quarrel about her hardly began with me," he said.

"No, you are right—it did not begin with you. It is I who am to blame for it. Only sometimes, dear," she said wistfully—"do you not understand? —sometimes it seems as if one were such a hypocrite—a hypocrite and a coward too—always to keep silent over what one feels. But there, I will not say anything more. Be generous to me,—that is all."

"Do I fail generally in being generous?" he asked.

He had put his arm round her, but he had done it coldly enough. She knew that in his heart he had not forgiven her. As she laid her head on his shoulder, the tears came to her eyes, sadly and silently. No, he never meant to fail in doing his duty by her. He meant always to be kind to her; he would not forget that she had claims upon him; he would give her everything, she knew—except the love that never had been hers.

"No, I do not say that you are not generous," she answered, after a few moments, in a low voice. "It is only that I am exacting, I suppose,—because I am afraid."

She pressed his hand upon her bosom for a moment, and then turned away, and went to make ready for her guest. When Mrs. Elton came, an hour afterwards, she was ready to receive her with quiet courtesy. The widow came in overflowing with gratitude and with self-excuses. She seemed genuinely to have been a little agitated and frightened.

"My dear, I shan't get over it for a month!" she exclaimed. "Just think of coming home and seeing fire belching out from your drawing-room windows, and a crowd of people round your house! I simply sat still in my carriage and screamed. I am sure they must have taken me for a mad woman. But oh, it was so awful!—and I didn't know but what the servants were being burnt to death. I can't think now—I really can't—how I ever got courage to enter the door, but after the fire had been got out I was in such a fever to see what harm had been done that I rushed upstairs. Just imagine it! I am sure I could never do it again. And there were the firemen still squirting water at the walls, and all my pretty new carpets spoilt, and oh, such a scene! I felt I really must get away somewhere; and then all at once, like an inspiration, the thought flashed upon me that I would ask you to let me come to you. And you are not very—*very* much shocked at me,

are you? Mr. Langton," and she turned to him with her hands held out, as if in entreaty, "even *you* are going to give me a little bit of welcome, are you not?"

"Are you accustomed to find me such an inhospitable monster that you think it necessary to ask that?" he answered, with a laugh.

"A monster! Oh, no, no; you are never a monster—at least, not to me; only, you know, an Englishman's house is his castle, and how can I tell if you may care to have your castle invaded by forlorn dames who have had their roofs burnt over their heads? You know I was not a bit afraid that Mrs. Langton would refuse me shelter, but I *was* a little afraid of *you*. Women are always good to women."

"Is that your experience?" Norah asked, with a little jar in her voice. "It seems to me that you must be a good deal of a woman lover to say so."

"My dear, I *am* a woman lover. I can't bear those women who run down their own sex. I think we are very nice, kind creatures. Are we not, Mr. Langton?"—and she smiled into his face.

"It would ill become me to deny it," he answered.

"Of course you can't deny it. Nobody ought to deny it. Ah, my dear Mrs. Langton, forgive me

for keeping you standing. I know I am such a dreadful chatterbox!" And, gathering her wraps together, she followed Norah, laughing and light-hearted, to her room.

"Oh, it is delightful to be here!" she exclaimed, as they went upstairs. "If you knew how I love this house, and everything about it, I do believe you would suspect I had burnt down my own on purpose to come. I have been in such a state of fright and misery for these last three hours, and now I feel as if I had not a care left! Do you know, I am not going to take one bit of trouble about what they do in Brook Street. I mean to put the whole business into Routledge and Ferguson's hands, and I declare I won't look near them till it is finished. Really, it is very ridiculous—I am almost afraid it is very wrong; but I feel just like a child out for a holiday. Oh, you dear creature, how good you are to take me in!" And then Mrs. Elton put her hands on Norah's shoulders and kissed her enthusiastically. "I mean to be as happy here as the days are long," she said.

It was probably as a necessary preliminary to the carrying out of this intention that Mrs. Elton at once took it upon her to make herself entirely at home in her friend's house. On the evening when she arrived, indeed, it was late, and she was really

tired with the excitement of the day, so that after an hour's talk Norah had the satisfaction of consigning her safely to the solitude of her own room; but on the next morning she rose strengthened by a night's repose, and fully ready to make herself, as she expressed it in her own words, "quite one of themselves." So, fired with this amiable desire, Norah found her half an hour after breakfast was over, ensconced in a comfortable seat in her husband's study, helping him to read his proofs.

"You see, I have stolen a march on you," she exclaimed with a merry laugh, as Norah came in. "I knew you would be busy seeing after your house, as a good housewife should, for ever so long, so I thought I would come and do your work for you here; and, do you know, though I never helped to correct proofs before in my life, I am getting on beautifully! I had just discovered such a terrible blunder before you came in—actually found it out all by myself, for your husband declares he never should have noticed it!"

Perhaps it was as well that Mrs. Elton's speech had lasted long enough for Norah to gain time to recover herself, for at her first entrance into the room the blood had mounted to her face. By the time Mrs. Elton had finished speaking, however, she had become cool enough to say quietly, "I think an-

other day you must not take my proof-reading away from me." And then she turned to her husband, and merely added, "You know this is *my* work, Roger."

"I thought it was such dull work that you might be glad to forego your right to it for once," he answered, with an assumption of ease.

"Oh, no, you could not have thought that," she replied.

And then, saying nothing more, she only asked some question that she had come into the room to ask, and went away, leaving the other two again alone; and the moment she was gone Mrs. Elton laid down the manuscript on her knees, and clasped her hands over it with an expression of distress.

"There now! I meant no harm, and yet I have done wrong!" she exclaimed, plaintively.

"Who says that you have done wrong? Nonsense!" he exclaimed, though in a tone that betrayed his own want of ease.

"Oh, but I am sure she is vexed. She thinks that I have taken something upon me that I ought not. What shall I do?"

"Do? Let us go on with our reading again, unless you are tired."

"But if she thinks I ought not to be here?"

"She does not think so."

"Do you really mean that?" and the widow looked at him with eyes quite pathetic in their earnest inquiry. "She is such a dear creature—only—do you know," hesitating timidly, "sometimes I think she is a little—just a little—shall I say it?" She paused a moment, but he made no answer. "You won't be angry?—just a little exacting. Isn't she?"

"I don't know," he said, quickly.

"Of course it is so natural. We poor women, what have we to think about except being loved and loving?—and she is so affectionate, I am sure she is. But yet every wife ought to guard herself against being exacting. Don't you think she ought? It is such a mistake *ever* to expect too much. Couldn't you say so to her?—quite gently and tenderly, you know."

"I think we had better go on with our reading," he said.

"Oh, yes; but you are not angry with me, are you?"

"No, no; of course not."

"You must not mind what I have said. I am such a foolishly impulsive creature, you know; I am always saying things I ought not. If it was not that I have been grieved sometimes when I have thought Mrs. Langton showed just a little——"

"I suppose we all have faults enough. Norah, I suspect, has fewer than most of us," he interrupted, quickly, and then he took up his proof sheet again, and began to read; and Mrs. Elton was forced reluctantly to resign her discussion of the weaknesses of her hostess's character.

Possibly during the days that followed this one the widow supposed that she was only performing a kind service towards this friend, who had been so unfortunately afflicted with an exacting temper, by doing her best to accustom her to the occurrence of various of those unimportant incidents that had so foolishly disturbing an effect upon her. Of course if Norah wanted to read proofs with her husband Mrs. Elton would not for the world interfere with that desire; she restored her self-chosen occupation to Norah, in Mr. Langton's presence, with the prettiest speech of resignation; but though she gave up that special method of amusing herself, there were many other methods of amusing herself that she speedily discovered, and joyously gave herself up to, and with such a perfectly acted assumption of being utterly unconscious that they could be in any way distasteful to Mrs. Langton, that Norah herself was, at any rate at moments, nearly taken in by her aspect of innocence.

For instance; the importance of an abundance

of fresh air being deeply impressed upon the widow's mind, she was naturally anxious to impress it equally on the minds of her host and hostess, and for this purpose it would happen that as often as once or twice a day she would find herself in the study when Norah was busy elsewhere, coaxing Mr. Langton to cease from his labours, and,—just for ten minutes,—just for five minutes,—to come out into the garden; and often, at any rate, if not always, he would let himself do what she asked, and would saunter with her up and down the shady walks for perhaps an hour together. "It does him so much good; don't you think it does?" she would say sweetly to Norah.

Then she was so fond of music too, and it was so delightful (who could doubt it?) to play and sing to some one who remembered all the old songs she had been used to sing in the happy bygone time—as Mr. Langton did. Dear Mrs. Langton, she said, could hardly understand the sad pleasure that it gave her. She would sit at the piano, and dig up reminiscences without end, while her fair fingers went softly wandering over the keys of the instrument: she would recall a hundred past days to her host's memory. Of course it was impossible for Norah to take part in these charming recollections; besides, Mrs. Langton was no musician. She had been

used, it is true, to play to her husband at times before the widow's advent: perhaps if he had asked her she would have played to him still,—but he seemed to forget that.

He forgot that, and a good many other things too, apparently, during these weeks. Norah used to wonder sometimes at the end of a day whether he remembered that in the course of it they had never been a moment alone. She did not blame him that they were not alone—with the widow flitting about the house as she did it was no fault of his probably; but sometimes, she used to think, he might have noticed or regretted it. The long quiet hours she had been accustomed to spend with him in his study had all come to an end since the widow began her visit. If Norah tried to sit in the study now Mrs. Elton would put her head in at the open window, and prettily beg to be admitted too: if Norah so much as showed herself in the garden with her husband the widow's quick eyes would discover them, and her nimble feet carry her to their side.

Norah had to bear it all as she could. "It is only for a little while," she tried to say to herself. "She will go away soon." But yet, when would she go? Day placidly followed day, and week followed week, and no sentence fell from Mrs. Elton's lips

containing so much as a proposal to return to town. "How I shall long for this sweet place when I am back in Brook Street!" she did indeed occasionally ejaculate; but three whole weeks had rolled out their slow length, in profound silence as to the period at which she expected these pangs of yearning to commence, before at last one morning Norah, roused to endure no longer, quietly took the matter into her own hands, and obliged her guest to broach the subject of her departure.

"Have you made up your mind yet when you will return to town?" was what Mrs. Langton said to her visitor, plainly, though with an effort.

The widow had been making one of her little sentimental speeches about the solitariness of her lot—"alone in the midst of a crowd," she said: "that melancholy little drawing-room all the home I have;" and it was in reply to these sad sentences that Norah was hard-hearted enough to put the inquiry about the period at which Mrs. Elton contemplated returning to that mournful apartment.

The question must no doubt have come upon the widow unexpectedly; but she almost instantly proved herself equal to the task of answering it. With a pretty eagerness, as if her hostess's interrogation, instead of taking her aback, had really given her quite a sense of relief—

"Oh, my dear, this was just what I was wanting to speak to you about!" she exclaimed. "I was wondering this very morning what you would say if I were to run away. For I *must* be thinking of it, you know," she said reluctantly, and so much as if she believed that only by great tact and delicacy could she induce Mrs. Langton to bear the prospect of her departure, that Norah almost blushed at the consciousness of her own inhospitality. "I *must* be going back—soon."

"Yes—I suppose so," said Norah.

"And yet it is so delightful here. Ah, so delightful! How I shall look back to this time!"

"You are very good," said Norah gravely.

"Don't you think it would be well for me to drive up one day and *see* the house before I really go back? I have no doubt it is all right, as Routledge and Ferguson say so,—but yet—if I could just drive up one afternoon, and look at things, you know, and give a few orders, and then return here for—for a last day or two? Do you think I might? Ah, you know it is so dreadful to go away—that is the truth of it!" cried the widow suddenly, with effusion. "I feel as if being here had made such a coward of me. When I think of these weeks, and then contrast them with—with what I have to go back to—— Oh, Mr. Langton," turning to him as

at this moment he came into the room, and smiling through her tears, "I think you had better go again to your study. We are talking about plans, and we don't want you just now. Go away for ten minutes, and then we will tell you what we have settled."

"What is it that you are trying to settle?" he asked, coming forward without paying any regard to her request. (Perhaps he knew, as well as Norah did, that she did not mean him to regard it.)

"Oh—only about my going away."

"I am sure you are not in a hurry to go away," he said.

"Now, don't come and tempt me!" she exclaimed, raising her hands imploringly. "You must not, indeed! It is hard enough to resist your wife, but if *you* come too——"

"I think you had better do as you propose," Norah struck in, in a tone of suppressed impatience. "Mrs. Elton thinks that she would like to drive over, Roger, and see that the house is quite ready before she decides on her day for leaving us. Of course she could do that this afternoon,—or whenever she pleases."

"The house, I have no doubt, will take care of itself. You need not trouble yourself about it," he said.

"Oh, you are so good; you are both of you too good. I needn't go in to-day perhaps," said the widow, hesitating, "but—ah, you mustn't let me take advantage of you—indeed you mustn't! My dearest Mrs. Langton, really and truly tell me—am I not in the way?—are you not expecting other visitors?"

"Certainly not," Mr. Langton answered before Norah could speak.

"No—we are not expecting anyone at present," Norah said coldly.

"And you really, I am to believe, would like me to stay a little longer? Ah, you dear kind people, you are only saying so, I am afraid, to please me, but—you know what a weak creature I am,—and it is so sweet to stay where one is happy!" said the widow, and put her handkerchief to her eyes for a moment, and then looked up again gratefully and pathetically, smiling through her tears.

With her heart hot and indignant Norah turned away, and left the other two to end the scene as they liked together.

"Roger, why did you ask her to stay?" she said reproachfully an hour afterwards to her husband. "She has been here for more than three weeks—her house is ready for her; you might have let *her go.*"

"How could I possibly help asking her to stay when she wanted to be asked?" he replied in a tone of half angry self-defence.

"*I* could have helped it, so I do not see why *you* could not."

"Possibly you may not see, but I do."

He said this shortly, and took up his pen when he had said it, as if he were about to write, and wanted no more discussion of the subject. But for once she was too sore and too indignant to be silent.

"I think, Roger," she said, trying hard to speak steadily, "that you owe me some consideration. I have tried to be patient since Mrs. Elton came here; I have made no complaints, as you know; I have not reproached you for anything; but I have only been so quiet because I have said to myself that she would leave us soon. Now you have asked her to lengthen her visit, and I tell you plainly that I cannot trust myself to bear what she has made me bear for these three last weeks much longer."

He was sitting at his desk, and she was standing beside him. She knew, as she looked at him, by the change in his face, that she had made him very angry, but though she had made him so angry, she noticed (and it gave her a pang to notice it) that he kept his eyes fixed on the table as she spoke

to him, and had not courage or consciousness of rectitude enough to lift them up.

"I don't know what in the world you are talking of," he merely said harshly, after a moment or two's pause. "I think, Norah, you had better take care how you make such speeches as these."

"Yes, I think so too," she answered, in a low voice. "If I had not been careful I should have made some such speech as this long before now. A good many other women would, I think."

"Then they would have been fools," he said sharply.

"As you think I am now?"

"You need not put words into my mouth, Norah, when I have not used them. I simply say——" And then he was suddenly silent.

"You say—I suppose you mean—that I am complaining when I have no reason to complain?—that I am jealous when I have nothing to be jealous about? Yes, that is what you want to say, I know, but you cannot say it, because it is not true."

"It is perfectly true," he answered hotly.

"Then I can only say I have mistaken the place I ought to hold in your house."

There was a long silence after this; she turned away from him, and went to the window; he sat still, but without taking up his pen again. Of course

he was angry with her; but perhaps during these last weeks he had been too often angry with himself also not in the bottom of his heart to have some feeling for her. And yet what could he say? How could he allow that she had cause for her complaint, and yet refuse to promise that he would give her cause to complain no longer?

They both remained silent for five minutes; and then, at the end of that time, woman-like, she went back to him. She returned to his side, and with that yearning, pathetic love of hers, put her hand upon his shoulder.

"Dear, do you think I ever forget how you came to marry me?" she said, suddenly and wistfully. "It was a mistake perhaps — It is hard for me to say that, but I daresay it was a mistake, and that you think now that, because you did not love me, I have less claim upon you than a woman would have whom her husband had loved more. I suppose that is all natural; but, ah, think a little—think a little, that it is hard for *me!*"

"*What* is hard for you?" he asked, sharply; and then she had to pause for a few moments, for the tears had started to her eyes, and she had to wait until she sent them back.

"Do you think it is not hard to sit by and see the woman you used to love trying to make you love

her again?" she said presently. "Roger, I am not hard upon her; I do not say she *means* to do harm; she is only cruel because she is so vain and selfish. If *she* had a heart to be broken I think I should be sorry for her,—but, you see, she only makes other people suffer, and she suffers—nothing. There is the unjust part of it. She comes between us—she takes peace away from both of us—and it is all only that she may get amusement for herself. Oh, love, let her go away! I will manage it if you will only let me. Dear love, for both our sakes, let her go away!"

She wound her arms about his neck—both her arms passionately round him: she kissed him as if she thought her kisses might do what her words could not; and for his answer, after a few moments, he put her from him.

"This is perfect folly, Norah. You are letting yourself be scared by a mere imagination," he said contemptuously. "Mrs. Elton is a coquette; is there any man living, do you think, who knows that better than I do? But if she wishes to stay here a little longer it is impossible that we can refuse to let her stay, and—whatever you may think—I tell you it is equally impossible for me to be anything but courteous to her in my own house. Now let me hear no more of this. I both know my duty to you, and—

though you seem to doubt it—I know what I am about."

And then he turned from her, and resumed, or seemed to resume, his writing; and after standing still for a moment or two she went away. Probably as she went he did not guess how her heart was swelling, and how the tenderness to which he had not responded with a single word was becoming mingled with indignation. "I deserved some consideration from him," she said to herself, "and he has given me none. He has chosen to treat me as if I was in the wrong, and—let him say what he likes—let him think what he likes—it is he who is wrong, and not I."

So she went away with her heart hot and sore, and nothing that Mr. Langton did when they next met tended to make its heat and soreness less, for he was angry with her for what she had said, and chose to show his anger by paying marked attention to Mrs. Elton. He talked almost exclusively to her at dinner; he walked with her after dinner; he stood by the piano at night when she sang. Norah was silent enough, and Mrs. Elton, who made up her mind in a moment about all things, decided quickly that she had a headache, and petted and caressed her, and poured eau-de-Cologne upon her hair, till Norah nervously at last broke into a laugh of which

probably neither her husband nor the widow understood the bitterness, and—

"If it pleases you to insist that I have a headache it certainly does not matter," she said—"only pray, even if you think I have one, leave it to cure itself; and if you say I am not fit to go out I will take your word for it, if you like, and stay in—only don't suppose that I am going to lie down; I am not going to lie down; I am going to sit here and read."

And then as Mrs. Elton, possibly for once feeling conscious that she had been rebuffed, abandoned her kind offices, and took refuge from her hostess's ill-temper in the garden, Norah took up a book (of which she read little enough), and sitting down in the window sadly watched the two figures that went walking up and down the gravel paths side by side.

"Poor darling, she has got a little overdone; I am sure that is it," the widow said tenderly to Mr. Langton. "She is such a dear creature, but every now and then I notice—don't you?—that she gives way a little bit—poor dear pet! I wish she had let me give her some sal-volatile just now. Sal-volatile is such an excellent thing for nerves."

"It is nothing at all; she is only a little tired," Mr. Langton answered quickly.

"Yes, exactly; a little tired and upset. I know what it is to feel like that so well. And, do you know, I think it is the kindest thing to come out and leave her for a while to herself. We poor women get over these foolish weaknesses so much more quickly when there is nobody near to worry us—don't you think so? Oh, but, to be sure, how can *you* tell?" cried the widow, suddenly laughing at herself. "What do you know of weaknesses—you who, of course, despise all such things?"

"I will be patient for a little longer," Norah was saying to herself; "but if it is her scheme to stay here for good, or even to stay for the summer, I will not bear it. Perhaps I had no right to be angry with him for what he did to-day—I can scarcely tell. Of course it must be hard for a man to let a woman know that she has been his guest too long. Perhaps he could not help asking her to stay. Only when the question of her going is raised next, he must let *me* settle it. I shall have to tell him that, and then he will be angry (ah, God help me!); but even if he is angry, still I must do it." The others were walking to and fro in the garden while she sat thinking this.

It was not often during these days that Norah spent much time alone with Mrs. Elton. If she had loved her guest better than she did, it would have

been most natural for the two women to have passed a good deal of their mornings together; but Norah could not do it. "I feel as if I were wearing a mask all the time I am with her," she used to say to herself; so, to escape from this bondage, she would find occupation in any part of the house rather than the drawing-room, and the widow, left alone to seek amusement, would generally pursue that search with great success and satisfaction. For example,—she would write a letter, perhaps, and then would stray out into the garden, and stand talking to Mr. Langton for five minutes,—for a quarter of an hour,—for half an hour sometimes, through the open study window; then, returning indoors, possibly she would sit down and sing, taking care to set the drawing-room door open before she commenced that exercise, and keeping her ears well on the alert to catch the sound of another door that sometimes opened across the hall, and of a step that sometimes crossed the oilcloth; and then, having sung, of course she would need to rest a little, and talk again to—the person who had left his work to listen to her. And, after that, there might be a book that she wanted from one of the study bookshelves, and, as she would not for the world let Mr. Langton waste his time in looking for it, she must of course go back with him to the library to

search for it, and sometimes—well, sometimes it took a long time to find the volume.

Occasionally, as the widow moved about the house in this way, she, as might be supposed, would encounter Norah, and whenever she did so meet her, Mrs. Elton's face would brighten almost as if the object dearest to her in the world had crossed her vision, and she would spring to her hostess with extended arms, and sometimes with quite a little storm of tender reproaches.

"Oh, you dear, naughty runaway, where *have* you been?" she would exclaim. "I have been enjoying my own company till—till I am so tired of myself that, you see, I have dared even to invade Mr. Langton's sacred solitude, just that I may hear the sound of another human voice."

Or it might be—

"Oh, my dear, I have been so naughty! Here have I been singing, and disturbing Mr. Langton, till, you see, I have fairly driven him out of his study; but it is all your fault, for if you had been here to talk to me and look after me, I should have been as quiet as a mouse, and your husband would have got—how much more of your book would you have got written, Mr. Langton?" And she would rise up from the music-stool, smiling on both husband and wife with a smile as innocent as an infant's.

"How lovely she is!" Norah would often think. She used to think many a time that she saw every charm the widow possessed with eyes made morbidly keen and sensitive to them; perhaps she even exaggerated her beauty because her beauty was so bitter to her. "She is the loveliest woman I know—I think the most lovely woman I have ever seen," she said once quietly to her husband, and Mr. Langton looked up surprised and made no answer. He did not probably understand the tone in which she spoke, with its sad acceptance of the fact that, in some moods, at least, it gave her so sharp a pang to allow.

A week went past after that day on which the widow had so sweetly consented to prolong her stay at Highgate, and not another word was breathed by her in the course of it implying the slightest intention of taking her leave. One afternoon, indeed, having herself business in town, Norah induced her guest to accompany her there, and, going to Brook Street with her, conclusively ascertained with her own eyes that the widow's house was once more perfectly ready to receive her; but, though they both learnt this fact, Mrs. Elton seemed curiously for the moment entirely to forget the natural effect that it might be supposed to have upon her movements.

"What delightful people Routledge and Ferguson

are!" she only exclaimed in an ecstasy when she saw her renovated rooms. "There is nothing like putting things in their hands; they do everything so artistically. Why, if I had worn myself to a shadow I should never have been able to produce such a result, and here have they (I daresay in the easiest way in the world) done the whole of it for me, and instead of me wearing myself out I have been—ah, have I *not* been happy all the time with my dear dear friends!" And in her enthusiasm she insisted on embracing Norah on the spot; after which she drove back to Highgate, and, being met at the door by Mr. Langton, informed him, with a look as if she had been relieved from a world of care, that she had come back with—oh, he did not know what a light heart!

"For they have made me charming! Literally, they have made me charming!" she exclaimed.

"Who has been doing that? I thought you had been made charming long ago," he answered.

And then she ran into the house laughing and blushing. She had a pretty trick of often blushing when compliments were paid her, almost as if she were still a young fresh girl, with none of the bloom of her heart rubbed off.

CHAPTER IX.

PERHAPS it would all have been amusing enough if Norah had only been a less painfully interested spectator. She used to think so herself. She often thought how, if she and her husband had been at one about Mrs. Elton, they would have laughed at all her little artifices. The sound of that sweet, shrill voice trilling through the rooms would not have grated on Norah's ear then; the play of the beautiful eyes would not have made her heart sore. But what is amusement to us in certain circumstances, in others is almost death; and Norah, as these days passed on, felt as if Mrs. Elton's presence in the house was slowly poisoning her own and her husband's life—as if all the little affection he had ever had for her was withering up in the atmosphere with which Mrs. Elton surrounded him.

Since the morning when they had had that unkind talk together, from which she had gone away so wounded and sore, he had been cold and reserved to her. They had talked to one another in

public, but in private they had hardly talked to one another at all. The words that had been spoken that day had made a division between them which neither of them since had been able to bridge over or forget. Probably he was angry with her still, for he did not love her well enough to forgive her for what she had said; *she* was not angry, for her love for him was too deep to make it possible for her to retain anger against him, but the hardness with which he had treated her that day had made her ever since shy of being with him, or of showing any tenderness to him, or of expecting on his side any kindness. He had been offended, and though he said nothing to her in words he showed his offence in a silent coldness that wounded and chilled her.

She had ventured to say to him wistfully once, "Are you angry with me still, Roger? Ah, dear, don't be angry!" But when she had said this he had shaken off the hand that she had placed on his arm, and given her a short, impatient answer.

"Why should you suppose I am angry? For heaven's sake, Norah, don't be fanciful!" he had replied, in a tone too little kind to make her risk a second effort at reconciliation. So, if there had been peace between them during these days, there had at any rate been nothing more than peace, and the

widow had had the field to herself, almost undisturbed by Norah.

She had had the field to herself, and she had made hay in it to her heart's content. She had spent what she would herself have called quite a charming week. "Dear Mrs. Langton seems to have become so busy of late that I see nothing of her," she had, indeed, exclaimed once or twice in a tone of tender regret; but, after she had satisfied her conscience by uttering this gentle complaint of the loneliness to which her hostess left her, it was delightful to see with what satisfaction and rapidity she set about consoling herself for Norah's neglect, and how successful her efforts at resignation were.

"Are you going to take pity on me, and talk to me a little?" she would say frankly to Mr. Langton, coming with a coaxing smile on her beautiful lips to that tempting open study-window of his; and then she would lean her arms upon the window-sill—which was of a most convenient height for leaning on,—and talk to him, till sometimes, quite forgetful of time, more than an hour passed away. She talked to him, and made him talk. What else could he do? What *can* a man do when a woman holds him in conversation and will not go away?

One morning she had come in this way—ostensibly to bring a rose-bud to him (he was a man

who, left to himself, would almost as soon have thought of wearing a tiara on his head as a rose in his button-hole; but when Mrs. Elton brought the flower to him what could he do but rise and take it?), and, having brought her gift, of course, as usual, she stayed and talked to him.

She stood on the garden side of the window, and chattered to him about fifty things. She was often very gay and lively when she talked to him. To-day she was lively at the first, but presently, by, as it happened, an unfortunate chance, it pleased her to change her mood. She began to talk about herself, and she had a trick of generally making talk about herself pathetic.

"When I go back to town how I shall think of all this!" she began to say—"these bright days, this sweet garden, these—these two dear friends! Ah, you do not know what it is to me to feel that you are my friend again! These last months seem as if they had taken an actual weight off my heart. Do you know, sometimes I used to think you would never forgive me. Once when we were in Corfu I was very ill, and thought I should die, and never see you again, and—and I was feverish, I suppose, for it seemed to me as if I *couldn't* die without seeing you. That was strange, wasn't it? Oh, I used often to be so unhappy! But that is all over now,

is it not?—and you have forgiven me *quite?*—and we are never going to be anything but friends any more?"

Mrs. Elton made this inquiry with eagerness, with a beseeching look in her eyes, as if the question were one that she had never asked before; whereas, instead of that, in reality it was one that she had asked at least twenty times before, and the answer to which Mr. Langton had repeatedly given her. But impulsive people of course forget many things they say, and, although Mr. Langton on his side (not being impulsive) perhaps did not forget, still it was impossible that he could do anything to remind her that the matter had been settled between them a good many times already, or could fail to give her the fresh assurance that seemed necessary to secure her peace of mind.

Accordingly, when she exclaimed, "We are never going to be anything but friends any more?" he answered quietly—"I hope we shall never be anything but friends."

"You hope it?" she echoed, with a little touch of disappointment in her voice when he said—"but do you believe that we shall?"

"Why should I not believe it?" he replied.

"How can I tell why? Unless—oh yes, I can *tell you if* you like. Shall I?" said the widow, and

looked up with a sudden reproachful expression in her eyes. "It is because you don't care—because it is nothing to you—because it is all the same to *you* whether we are friends or enemies. That is why. But it is all right, of course. You have everything you want—your happy home—your wife—your work; your life is so full and content; what can *my* poor friendship matter now? I shall go away; and when I am gone, perhaps you will never so much as once think of me sitting in my lonely rooms."

"You should not say that. You know I—you know we shall both think of you," he said.

"Ah—but in what way?" And then she looked pathetically into his face again. "You may think of me only to be—only to be glad that I am gone!"

"How can you talk such nonsense?" he said.

"But I am afraid you will be glad. You will be so happy to be alone again together—you and Norah. Won't you? I shall sit at home and think of you both, but you—you will never think of me!"

"You know we shall think of you often."

"Yes, you say that, but I am afraid it is not true. If I could believe it was true—" And then

the widow's lips began to tremble, and her eyes to fill.

Perhaps her husband was more loyal to Norah than Norah sometimes knew.

"It has been a great pleasure to me to have you here," he began to say abruptly. "I am sure you know that. It has been a great pleasure—" and then in a moment of weakness he hurriedly added in a lower voice—"if it has been also a great pain."

The instant he had said these words she caught at them.

"Ah, not a pain! No, no—*you* must not say that!" she exclaimed. "If anyone suffers it must only be me. I *ought* to suffer, you know—that is only just; but not anyone else,—and above all, not *you!*" And at these last pathetic words the widow (unwisely forgetting to glance round before she did it) tremblingly laid her hand on Mr. Langton's; and the next moment was aware that Norah had seen her meek caress—perhaps had even heard some of her words, for she had come round the corner of the house unnoticed, and was standing not three yards from her side.

As if a wasp had stung her the widow caught back her fingers; the colour rose to her face. For a moment at least her self-possession wavered. But

she was a woman of quick resources, and besides—though no doubt to Mrs. Langton, coming suddenly upon the scene, it might have looked a little odd—what harm in reality had she been doing? The best of us may be misjudged so easily when taken unawares. So her heart gave two, or at the most three, uncomfortably loud beats; and then she took a breath, and turned to her hostess, smiling sweetly and sadly, and, holding out her hands—

"Oh, I am glad you have come at last!" she said. "I want you so much, for I have been getting a little miserable, and I think women console women best. I—I have been bothering Mr. Langton with my low spirits, and he will be very thankful to make me over to you, I know. Now you are going to stay with me—are you not? You are going to let me have a nice walk round the garden with you? Ah—do! Mr. Langton, I won't worry you one bit more. I shall be all right now that I have your wife to comfort me." And she twined her arm in Norah's, and led her away, and told her, with the tears in her eyes, how suddenly she had got so low-spirited that she was afraid she had been almost making a goose of herself,—and she had been so vexed—"for men don't understand, my dear, and though he was kind to me (he is always kind, you know), I am sure he must have thought me

such a poor weak creature,—as indeed I *am*, only of course one doesn't want everyone to know it," and, half laughing, half crying, the widow looked up to Norah with the sweetest, most confiding eyes.

"It is just eighteen months since poor Fred died. It was this day of the month. It often comes over me so, you know," she said, clinging to Norah suddenly, with a little sob.

"I should think it must," Norah answered, gravely; and then the widow, as if her heart was overcharged with the subject, burst into so pathetic an account of Captain Elton's last illness that Norah, in common courtesy, could not interrupt the narrative, nor bring back the talk to the embarrassing point from which it had started.

Probably, indeed, she did not care to bring it back. If she meant to take notice of what she had seen to anyone, she did not mean to take notice of it to Mrs. Elton. She walked quietly by the widow's side, and let her pour out her reminiscences. Norah was a woman who possessed a good deal of self-command, but who by nature, too, was very gentle —passionate in feeling, yet doubtful of herself, and humble in her opinion of what was due to her. She never gave way to anger quickly; she was patient sometimes to a fault,—sometimes, perhaps, almost to the verge of weakness. But yet she was

not really weak, and when she was once roused to assert herself she could stand her ground with a resolution as strong as it was quiet; only she was not roused quickly, and in a small matter it generally seemed to her easier to bear than to resist; and always, whether the matter was small or great, easier and sweeter to let those she loved rule her than to stand up for herself and her own right to rule.

This was what was always easiest to her; yet now she felt, as she silently walked up and down the garden by Mrs. Elton's side, that for the first time since her marriage she must oppose her husband, and oblige him to let her do what he had already declared should not be done. The time for doing this had come, she thought, and though she shrank from the prospect of opposing him, she did not say to herself that she could not do it. When once convinced of its necessity, it hardly (which was strange, perhaps, for certainly she had no conscious knowledge that she was stronger than he was) even occurred to her to doubt the success of her opposition.

She went to his room a little while after Mrs. Elton had left her, and found him sitting at his table at work.

"If you are not very busy, I want to speak to

you for a few minutes," she said quietly to him; and then, as he laid down his pen,—"I want to speak to you again," she said, simply and directly, "about Mrs. Elton's going back to town."

She sat down as she said this, and he merely set his lips and leant back in his chair, and made no answer to her. She paused for a moment or two, and then—

"Will you give me leave now," she said, "to tell her that I wish her visit here to come to an end?"

"You cannot tell her that you wish her visit to come to an end without gross discourtesy," he answered quickly.

"If you will let me do it, I promise you that I will not be discourteous. Let me do it, and you shall have nothing to reproach me with."

"Nonsense! You had far better leave things alone," he said.

"I had better let things alone, you mean, and allow her, if she likes, to remain here all the summer? Roger," she said, in a low voice, "I am very sorry, but I cannot do that."

"There is no reason whatever to fear that she should want to stay here all the summer."

"Is there not? She seems to me willing enough to stay."

And then he made no answer, and they were

both silent for a little. It was she who broke the silence first.

"You think I am unreasonable, Roger; you think I have no cause to complain of Mrs. Elton being here," she said, sadly; "but be honest with me; let me say a few words. Though (I know) you never really loved me, yet used I not at least to be something to you before Mrs. Elton came? When you married me, surely you *thought* at least that you cared for my companionship? And you did care for it then. If I was less to you than your wife ought to be, at least I was as much as if—perhaps—I had been your sister. But now I am nothing to you—and it is Mrs. Elton who has made me nothing."

"That is absurd!" he exclaimed, with an impatient movement.

"What is absurd?—that I say I am nothing to you? Well, can I think I am much when day after day passes and you scarcely speak to me?—when more than a week has gone since you last gave me a kind word? Ah, my dear," she cried quickly, "do not think that I am saying this to you hastily or passionately. If I thought that I owed it to you to be silent, God knows I would be silent; but how can I stand by and say nothing when I feel and see the harm that she is doing?"

She had been speaking with her heart upon her lips, but he made no reply to her. He only leant forward over his desk, with his mouth set, and his brows drawn together; and she knew that as yet she had only hardened him—that, so far, no word she had spoken had touched him, except to anger.

She sat still for a minute or two, and then she began to speak again.

"Do not let us vex one another, Roger," she said, beseechingly. "We cannot feel in the same way about Mrs. Elton—that is only too plain; so let us leave what is past alone. I did not come in reality to talk to you about her. I only came to speak about this one question of her going away. I have been thinking that if *I* were to go for a little while she could not stay here in my absence, so I want you to let me propose to go to my aunt for a few days, and then I will tell her, and she must make her arrangements to leave. Do you consent to my doing this?" she asked, after a moment's pause.

"Your plan is certainly a hospitable one!" he said, sarcastically, without answering her.

"It does not pretend to be hospitable."

"That is well,—as I think you will find she is rather too clever to be taken in by it."

"I do not want to take her in. I only want to

do a disagreeable thing with as little discourtesy as I can."

"It is a pity that you should be so resolved to do what you find disagreeable."

"It is a pity perhaps that I should be compelled to do it."

And then there was another silence. The colour had begun to come to her face during these last sentences.

It was he who broke this fresh pause. It had lasted for a good while, when suddenly, with an expression in his eyes that haunted her cruelly afterwards, he looked full in her face.

"If you have resolved to send Mrs. Elton out of the house, I shall not interfere to prevent you," he said; "only, remember, if you do it—I warn you beforehand—you will find it a mistake."

"How shall I find it a mistake?" she said, slowly, with an effort.

And then, when he did not answer her—

"I cannot think that you mean to threaten me," she said, trying to speak steadily, yet almost with a break in her voice. "I may be doing wrong—God help me, do you think I am so confident of my own wisdom that I do not feel that? But, if I am wrong, who should give me advice and try to lead me right, if not you? I am unhappy, and I come to you, and,

instead of helping me, here we sit talking like two enemies, who only thought of how to hurt each other. Oh, Roger, let us not do it! My dear," she cried—she stretched out her hand and asked for his—"my dear, let us not do it!"

The tears had come into her eyes; the sweet earnest face was all warmed with emotion; but he did not look at her, and did not, or would not, see the hand she held out to him. There are moments when even good enough men (men and women too) are hard as nether millstones. I do not think that Roger Langton was satisfied with himself at this moment, or, indeed, had been satisfied with himself for months past; but yet, though he was dissatisfied with himself, his wife's attitude perversely roused a spirit in him of obstinacy and resistance. She was right, he almost knew, yet something—the stubborn old Adam in his nature—would not let him yield to her.

She did not know that he was ill at ease as she rose, after a minute, and turned hopelessly from him. She only felt that he had rejected every effort she had made to touch him; she only thought that Mrs. Elton's lightest word was more to him than any word that she could utter.

He had returned no answer to her last appeal, and she made no further attempt to speak to him.

With her heart full of mingled pain and indignation, she went away, feeling cruelly that she had no power to move him. "Shall I yield to him and let her stay?" she asked herself, as she sat and wept in her own room; and for a little while she almost thought that she would yield, that she might win him back to be kind to her; but presently, when her self-command began to return, enough strength returned with it to restore her to her first resolve. It was hard to oppose him and rouse his anger against her, but—"Good cannot come out of evil. If I yield in this, I must yield in everything. I shall be a coward if I let her stay now," she thought.

CHAPTER X.

It was best to do what had to be done quickly, so that same afternoon Norah said frankly to Mrs. Elton—

"I want to go and stay for a few days with my aunt in town, and I am thinking of offering to go to her next week. Would that time suit you for your return home?"

The widow was sitting reading in an easy-chair. As Norah asked her question, she gave a quick glance up from her book to her hostess's face: then, next instant, with the most gracious eagerness—

"Oh, my dear, whatever time you like," she exclaimed. "Don't let me detain you for an hour. Of course, next week will do admirably—next week, or to-morrow, or whenever you please."

"I thought of proposing Tuesday," Norah said.

"Then let it be Tuesday, and I can go on Tuesday too. Shall we decide that?—and we can drive

up to town together. That will be delightful! And what about Mr. Langton?"

"I think he will stay here," Norah replied.

"Oh, persuade him not to do that! Why should he stay behind? If he does I know you will be wanting to run back again immediately. Now, why shouldn't you make him take a little holiday—go for a few days to your aunt, and then *both* of you come to me? Ah, that would be charming! You must do it, my dear—you really must!"

But Norah was proof against this attractive invitation, and even Mr. Langton shook his head at it when, half an hour afterwards, the widow repeated her proposal to him. No, he could not come and stay in Brook Street; he had no intention of being in town; he must stay at home and work, he replied.

He must stay at home and work, he told her. But meantime, during the last few days of the widow's stay at Highgate, he did not work much, it seemed to Norah. He spent more time with Mrs. Elton than he spent over his book: with a hard indifference (or so, at least, she thought it) to what his wife was feeling—with a hard, half-mocking indifference, she sometimes thought, to all things—he let the widow during these days engross his time. He was often moody; at times he was very silent,

and I fear even Mrs. Elton got small entertainment out of him; at other times, even when he talked to her, he talked bitterly or jestingly, almost, perhaps a looker-on might have thought, as if, though she still had influence over him, he was in reality and in his heart half weary of her. But yet, satisfied or dissatisfied, with either himself or her, he let her absorb his time, and interrupt his work; and as these slow days passed the only thing that Norah felt she knew with certainty was that each one of them was setting her further from her husband, and her heart began—at moments at any rate—to rebel against him with an indignant rebellion. But she said nothing either to draw them together again or to make their separation wider—until the last morning, when, as Mrs. Elton was in her room, finishing her preparations for departure, a few hours before they were to start she went into his study to speak to him of one or two trifling things that it was necessary to speak about before she could leave home; and then indeed she said a few words to him.

The matters she had come to arrange took only five minutes or so to discuss; she went over them with him and settled them quickly; then there was a few moment's pause, and after these few moments she said quietly—

"You have never asked me how long I shall be away."

"You will please yourself, I suppose, as to that," he answered in an indifferent tone.

"Do you mean that you do not care when I return?" she said.

He made no answer for a moment, and then said coldly—

"I mean that I have nothing to do with the matter. As you took no advice from me about going you are not likely to require me to advise you when to come back."

He took up his pen when he had made this reply, and she stood for a few moments without speaking, and then—

"Are you still angry with me, Roger, for having brought Mrs. Elton's visit to an end?" she asked him.

"There is no need for us to talk any more about that," he said shortly.

"I think you are wrong," she answered.

And then there was another silence. He began to write, with an attempt to seem unconscious of her presence, and she stood looking at him. When presently she spoke again her voice had got a harder tone in it than it had had at first.

"Before I go away there is something I should

like you to understand," she began to say. "I am sorry to take up your time, since you seem to wish me to think that you are busy, but I am afraid I must ask you to listen to me for a few moments."

He leant back in his chair, and looked up at her suddenly; their eyes met full before she went on speaking. Perhaps she read something of his mood in the hard expressionless gaze he gave her; but he, I think, scarcely on his side read hers.

"I shall not keep you long," she began to say quietly. "I merely want you to understand one or two things. The first is, that I refuse from this time forward to receive Mrs. Elton again here as a guest. It may possibly occur to you when she is going to ask herself to come back, so I think it best to say this."

"You seem to forget," he answered, quickly, with the colour flushing to his face, "that I am the master of my house."

"No, I do not forget that." She was making a great effort to speak without emotion, but she could scarcely keep her voice from trembling. "I know that you are the master of your house, and that you have the power to invite what guests you like to come to it; but you have not the power to compel me to receive them, and should Mrs. Elton ever

again wish to stay here I beg you to understand that I will not receive her."

"You will not?" he said, slowly.

"I will not."

And then they looked at one another again, for the first time in their lives as a husband and wife at open war. (She thought of that suddenly, and the thought almost broke her down.)

There was dead silence for a few moments between them. After that she was again the first to speak.

"Then there is another thing I wish to say. For the last month you have allowed yourself to forget every claim I have upon you. You have considered, I suppose, that my love makes me such a slave to you that, let you treat me as you will, I shall be satisfied only to live under your roof. Well, if you think so I am sorry, for you are wrong, and I am not so humble. I loved you, as you know, very dearly before you married me, and I may have thought then that I was not worthy of you; but you can scarcely fail to know, too, that you have given me cause to change my mind since that time. It has cost me something to do it,—more than you will ever guess, perhaps; but you best know how the change has been forced upon me. Of course I do not reproach *you* for *my* mistake. If I thought

you better than you are that was my fault, not yours. I only speak at all of what I used to think, to explain why in the future things will be different between us."

She paused when she had reached this point. She had been speaking very quietly, but suddenly she felt that her voice in a few moments more might pass beyond her own control, and so she stopped abruptly. She had meant to tell him in what way she intended that things should be different between them, but she had to break off without doing it.

The sense of wrongdoing unhappily does not always make people penitent. As Mr. Langton listened to Norah's bitter words he knew in his heart there was no one of them that she was not justified in speaking; he was unhappy enough; he was angrier with himself even than he was with her; if he would he might truly have told her that his weakness during this last month had humbled him, —that he knew she had ground both for her indignation and her contempt; but yet, though he might have told her this, and though his humiliation was genuine, he hardened his heart, and let the wrong that he had done her embitter him against her, and opened his lips to speak no word either of penitence or peace. He only said, in a hard voice, after a few moments, without looking at her—

"Perhaps *I* have learnt that I knew as little about *your* character when I married you as you knew about mine."

"There is no doubt of that," she answered, quickly. "I tell you frankly that you knew *nothing* of me when you married me."

"Then I should say you had better consider whether the revelation you have been making of yourself of late may not possibly account for some part, at least, of what you disapprove of in my conduct to you."

"If I deserve that rebuke I will try to take it home," she said, in a low voice.

"You deserve it most assuredly, whether you take it home or not."

"You mean to reproach me because I have been jealous?" she said. "Well, in so far as I have been jealous without cause I beg you to forgive me. I may have misunderstood some things—I know how possible that is. Oh! Roger," she cried, and, with all at once a kind of passion, she threw her feigned coldness from her; she could wear that mask no longer; she went up to him, and held her hands out to him imploringly. "Roger, have I been wrong? If I have been wrong, and you will tell me so, I will believe what you say, and nothing else. If you will only tell me that she has not come between us

—never mind what I have said—never mind what I have thought—oh, love, I will believe your word!"

She held her hands out to him, but he did not take them. He rose up suddenly with an impatient movement. Her appeal to him—probably because he could not answer it—only kindled his anger.

"What do I care for your belief?" he broke out almost savagely.

And then she shrank back from him. For the next few moments they both stood silent, she looking at him, he—*not* looking at her; then, with an impotent attempt at indifference, he took a step or two, and began to move the position of some books upon his table. One of them was a book with a folding map in it that had got displaced a little, and he opened and re-folded it. She was looking at him still as he did this; he had finished doing it, and had replaced the books before she spoke again.

"If you care nothing for my belief in you," she said at last, in a voice low and constrained with suppressed emotion, "then we have fallen even farther apart than I had thought. There is nothing more now for either of us to say."

And then, without waiting for him to answer her, she left the room.

Mrs. Elton, who was coming downstairs, met her in the hall as she was crossing it, and stood aside in involuntary silence to let her pass, for there was something in Norah's face that gave the widow a curious little shock, and made the words she would have spoken die on her lips.

"Dear me, I am afraid they have been quarrelling! Perhaps—perhaps it is just as well that I am going away," she thought quickly to herself, with a sudden feeling that bore some faint resemblance to remorse. And after hesitating for a few seconds, she softly turned round, and instead of pursuing her way to the study, whither her steps had been bent, went silently up the stairs again to her own room. "Poor fellow! I *am* sorry for him; but I am sure the last thing in the world I would do would be to make a division between them, and so—so I won't go to him, though it would comfort him, I daresay; I *know* it would comfort him," said the widow, feeling a little uneasy, yet taking herself in (as she had a wonderful power of doing) with smooth words; and she sighed, and went to the glass and arranged her hair a little, and thought what a perverse place the world was, and how hard it was that people, who meant no harm, could not be allowed to live pleasantly in it. "I am sure, if everybody was of my mind, we might all live to-

gether as happily and peaceably as—as the birds," said Mrs. Elton, with a fine ignorance of the facts of ornithology. And she sighed again, as she put on her bonnet, and gave a final touch to her auburn locks.

She put on her bonnet and mantle, and came down to the drawing-room, to wait till the carriage was announced. She would sit still there, she said to herself, and then nobody would accuse her of doing any mischief; so she took a book and read for a minute and a half, and then—— Well, who could find fault with her, or think there was any harm in it, if she just went out into the garden and got a fresh rose or two to take back with her to town? New gathered roses would be so sweet in Brook Street. She listened for a moment or two, wondering if Norah were nearly ready—if she would be likely to catch her wandering about the flower-beds; and then, with her heart beating a little faster than surely such a simple act ought to have made it beat, she rose from her seat, and slipped quickly out into the garden through one of the open French windows.

A minute or two afterwards Mr. Langton, sitting alone in that sad study of his, heard her singing. She was gathering her roses, and carolling softly to herself a pretty little French song that she knew he

liked. How could the simple creature guess that he would hear it? She was of course only singing to amuse herself (it was a foolish habit that she had, as she had told him twenty times before)—singing almost unconsciously, quite forgetting that she could be teasing or disturbing anybody.

"Oh—where have you come from?" she exclaimed, with quite a little start of surprise, when, turning away from a rose-bush, she suddenly found him at her side. She had been so deeply absorbed in gathering some particular rose-bud that, though he had come along the gravel walk, and crunched the gravel under his feet, it seemed she had been quite unconscious that he was approaching her.

"Are you all ready to take your departure?" he merely asked without answering her question.

"Yes—all ready. And I am getting a handful of flowers to take away with me. I shall set them on my table, and look at them to-night, and think of you—both," said Mrs. Elton, and gave a quick little sad smile, and then a sigh. "Will you come and see me before they are faded?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't know," he replied.

"But I want you to come. I ask you to come. You can't tell me that you have no time, for nobody can work all day long, and when working hours are

over, with Norah away, there will be no attraction to keep you here."

"No—*that* certainly is very true," he said bitterly.

"Then you will come?"

"Possibly," he said,—coldly enough.

"I don't know what you mean by possibly."

"Why need you care to know?"

"Why need I care? Do you think I don't care to understand my friends?"

"I don't know when I shall see you again," he said suddenly. "I may very likely be going away. I want some change."

"Ah, that is what I have sometimes thought!"—and she looked anxiously into his face. "I don't think you are quite strong. Tell me what is in your mind? Are you going abroad?"

"I don't know. I have no plans made yet."

"But you will tell me when you do make them? You won't go anywhere without coming to say good-bye to me?"

"Oh—I shall probably say good-bye to you."

"Only *probably!*"

She gave him a look of sad reproach, but almost at the moment that she did so she saw with the half of one eye that Norah had come in sight, and

so immediately, of course, with the courtesy due to her hostess, she turned round to meet her.

"Look what a thief I am! Look what I have been doing! I think Mr. Langton is quite shocked at me," she exclaimed playfully, displaying the flowers that she had gathered. "I am going to take all these back with me to town to remind me — to remind me of my happy month."

"They are scarcely worth carrying, I am afraid," Norah said quietly.

"Ah yes—they are worth it to *me!*" cried the widow. And then in a gentle little transport she stooped over her roses and kissed them.

"I think if you are ready now we had better go," Norah said.

She was very pale and composed. She walked alone to the gate, and the others followed her. When she had taken her seat in the carriage she merely said to her husband—"Unless you hear anything to the contrary from me, I shall be home on Saturday."

"Very well," he replied.

The widow leant forward and gave him both her hands.

"Good-bye. I have been so happy. Thank you a thousand and a thousand times," she said.

The colour rose to her face—the tears started to her eyes. She was half smiling and half crying as the carriage drove away.

CHAPTER XI.

"My dear, are you not expecting to see your husband?" Miss Etheridge said in rather a tone of surprise to Norah, after her niece had been with her for three days.

Ever since Mrs. Langton's marriage until now Miss Etheridge had known how inseparable the husband and wife had been; a score of times Norah had been unwilling to stay with her aunt even throughout an afternoon, because her husband, she had said, did not like her to be away from him; yet now of her own will she had come to stay with Miss Etheridge for the greater part of a week, and the days passed and Mr. Langton neither came to see her nor wrote. "It looks very odd," the old lady thought anxiously over and over again to herself; and then at last she put her question.

"My dear, are you not expecting to see your husband?"

She looked up to Norah as she spoke. She had

her spectacles on her nose, and her kind old eyes looked peeringly through them.

But I am afraid they did not help her much to read what was in her niece's mind, for Norah merely went on with her work and answered steadily,

"No—I don't think I shall see him. He comes so seldom to town now, and I told him I should be home on Saturday."

"Oh well, you know best of course," Miss Etheridge answered in rather a nervous way; "only I mean—I had thought he was likely to come."

"*I* had not," Norah replied in the same quiet tone; and then nothing more was said. There are some people whose confidence even those who are intimate with them feel it is not easy to invade, and I think in Miss Etheridge's estimation Norah had always been one of these.

Her niece was very quiet during these days that she spent in town. "No, I am not very well," she had said frankly to her aunt; "I think I want rest. This last month at home has been a tiring one." And then with a half laugh she began to tell her aunt a little about Mrs. Elton, and described to her with some humour how in various ways she had found it rather trying to live with the widow. Of course in her narrative she made very slight mention

of her husband's name, and confessed none of the great trouble that was eating out her heart.

"She must be a very foolish woman," Miss Etheridge said severely when Norah had finished her account. "I am sure Mr. Langton must have found it very annoying—did he not?—to have her in the house."

And then to that question, though it made her wince, Norah had to make what light answer she could.

"Oh, you know it was not the same to him that it was to me. He had not to sit with her and listen to her whether he liked or not—as I had," she merely replied; and Miss Etheridge asked nothing more. She was a good simple woman, and probably did not even suspect that Mrs. Elton had made any mischief between Mr. Langton and his wife.

Yet something she felt was wrong, and though she held her peace, her heart ached for the woman across whose bright sky she could see some cloud had come.

"I often think, my dear," she said to Norah one night, "that pretty nearly half the troubles in the world are the troubles we make for ourselves. We can see all round us how people who need not do it make themselves unhappy every day, and when one merely looks on it all seems so foolish; and yet

perhaps, without knowing it, we who judge others are all the while doing the same thing ourselves. I have often thought that. I have often thought, when some little vexation has passed, that one has made too much of it; that, if one had been wise, it need scarcely have been a trouble at all." And Miss Etheridge as she spoke glanced up at her niece's face with furtive tender eyes; but Norah went on with her work, and only after a moment or two said quietly—

"Yes—no one can help feeling that."

"So it ought to make us so much on our guard, you know. That was what I was thinking," added Miss Etheridge quickly; and then Norah again said "Yes." Perhaps she guessed what was in the other's mind, but if she guessed it she probably thought that the advice that might be good for others could not touch her case. For had *she* brought her own trouble on herself? The time had not come yet for Norah's pain to be mingled with any self-reproach—for her to ask herself if she might not have done differently—for her to think that, even in any degree, she as well as her husband might have been in fault. "Did I not do everything I could to touch him? Was I not tender enough to him? Did I not love him dearly enough?" she had merely asked herself. "Was I as *wise* as I might have been?"

she had *not* asked herself yet; and probably if she had she would not have found an answer to her question.

She had thought at first when she drove away from Highgate that it would be a relief to be separated for a little from her husband, but before a day had passed she began to feel how vain such hope of relief was. An indescribable restlessness and desire to return to the place she had left began to take possession of her before she had been away from it for four and twenty hours; through every moment of every day she knew that she was thinking of her husband—longing for the sight of his face again—longing to be near him, with a very passion of desire.

She would sit for hours thinking of the life that lay before them both, till her heart throbbed and her cheeks burned. She had said to herself plainly before now that she had wearied him with loving him too well; she had been from the first too easy to win; as her lover she had claimed too little from him; as her husband she had given him a worship that he neither returned nor cared for. She had said all this to herself, in cruel, undisguised words, letting the bitter truth pierce her. And now, she said, she had to undo what she had done.

But how was she to undo it? She had failed to touch him by her tenderness; how then could she

touch him? He had flung her love away; how could she make him care again for the thing he had despised? Many and many a time during these days her thoughts, trying to answer these questions, would wander far away from the book she feigned to read, and Miss Etheridge, watching her, would see how the page was seldom turned,—how the weary eyes were failing to do their work.

"I think, aunt, I will go home quite early to-morrow," she said abruptly, when Friday afternoon had come, and Miss Etheridge kindly made no effort to detain her.

"Do just what suits yourself, my dear," she said. "It is very pleasant to me to have you here, but of course you will be glad to be back in your own house."

Mrs. Elton had come one afternoon to call on Norah, while she was at Miss Etheridge's, and had begged her, with the most eager persuasions, to spend a day with her in Brook Street; but Norah had declined to spend a day, or even any portion of a day, with her.

"You are very kind—but I have come to town on purpose to be with my aunt, and I do not want to leave her," she said quietly and resolutely—and the widow had to retire, defeated.

Perhaps in her heart she did not care much about having been defeated, but, of course, she pre-

tended to care. She was very affectionate to Norah, and smiled upon her and caressed her till Miss Etheridge stared.

"She must be very fond of you if she means the half of what she says. I am afraid you are very ungrateful not to be pleased with her," she said to her niece when their visitor was gone, with rather a twinkle in her eyes. And then Norah laughed.

"You can understand how it has been rather severe to have a month of this," she said.

Norah had begun to count the hours until she should be at home again. Her lips were hot with feverish excitement when she kissed Miss Etheridge and bade her good-bye. "In another hour I shall see him," she was thinking to herself. How fast her heart beat as she drove along the familiar road! She was pale usually, but she knew, when she reached her own gate, that the colour had come into her cheeks. She thought of that suddenly as the maid opened the door to her, and as she thought of it she was glad, for she had no desire to enter her own house again looking ill or depressed.

It was only a servant who came to let her in, but as she was walking up the path to the house she saw her husband in a farther part of the garden, and summoning at once all her courage, she turned to meet him.

"I have come back early to-day because I wanted to see about some things at home," she said, in an indifferent way, as they came near each other. And then, as she held out her hand to him—"I hope they have made you comfortable, and that everything has gone well here?" she said.

She looked at him as she spoke, and he looked at her. What their thoughts were neither face expressed. He merely said, after a moment,

"Oh, yes—nothing has happened, I think." And then—"How did you leave your aunt?"

She told him how she had left Miss Etheridge, and they walked on towards the house side by side.

"We have had two very close days in town," she said. "I suppose it has been warm here too?"

"Yes, very hot," he answered.

"I thought everything looked so green and pretty as I drove up the hill. It all feels so much fresher and sweeter here than it does in town," she said.

"Yes, it is a great advantage to stand so high," he replied.

"The parks are beginning to look quite dusty," she said.

"I suppose so," he answered.

And then they had reached the house, and he stood back for a moment, and she passed in. They

did not speak to one another again. He went to his study, and she went upstairs. Perhaps, as he closed the door of his room, he felt a sense of relief. He had possibly expected her to come back wearing the aspect and assuming the tone of an injured and reproachful wife; and instead of wearing that aspect and assuming that tone, she had met him with a face that looked bright with health, and with words that betokened neither anger nor depression. With almost a feeling of gratitude to her he took his seat at his desk. He had dreaded a scene, but now he thought he perceived that she was going to bring her good sense to her aid, and inflict no scene upon him.

When they met next, a few hours afterwards, he addressed her in a tone and with a manner which were meant, and which she felt were meant, to be conciliatory. Ten minutes before dinner he came into the drawing-room, apparently in search of her, and standing near her as she cut off dead flowers and leaves from her geraniums in the window, began to ask her questions about what she had been doing. Had she seen anyone in town? Yes, she had seen two or three people; and as she went on snipping off her yellow leaves, she told him the few scraps of news that she had gathered during her absence. She did not pause in her occupation while

she talked, nor look at him, nor move an inch nearer to his side, but went on speaking as if he had been the merest stranger, and she a woman who cared nothing for him.

As he stood and put his questions to her, he became curiously, and, to tell the truth, uneasily, conscious of this. Hitherto she had always taken so humble, tender, and worshipping, or else so passionate and reproachful an attitude towards him, that this new position, so unlike either of the others, took him aback. He stood at her side, looking at her, trying through the disguise she wore to read what she was really thinking and feeling. "She is still angry," he thought to himself; "and she puts on this appearance of indifference to hide her anger." And then it occurred suddenly to him whether the wisest thing he could do would not be on the spot to say something quickly that should touch her, and bring her back to her old allegiance. He could do it, he did not doubt, with a word; and he had been in fault (he was ready to allow), and perhaps he owed it to her to do it. Suppose he were now—at once—to lay his hand on hers, and say warmly, "Norah, forgive me. I have been very lonely without you,"—suppose he were only to do this, could he not picture how she would look at him for a moment, and then for another moment would stand still while she

flushed and quivered, and then—as if it were *she* who needed to be forgiven—would break into some cry of love and penitence, and fling her happy arms about his neck. So quickly could he bring her back to him, he said; and then a dozen words more—a half admission that she had had cause to be angry, a few kisses, and their quarrel and division would cease. He had better do it, he thought; it would be the wisest plan; he had got the fitting words almost ready on his lips—when, unhappily, at that very moment, a servant opened the door, and announced that dinner was on the table; and Norah immediately, unconscious of what she had lost, put down her gardening scissors, and with a quiet "Shall we come?" turned from the window.

The opportunity had escaped him then, for he could not detain her and enact his little scene of reconciliation, short though he meant to make it, while the maid was waiting in the dining-room to remove the covers. "I will speak to her after dinner," he thought to himself as he followed her in silence from the room; but somehow when dinner was over, and they rose from table, it seemed harder to speak the words that he had meant to say than it had done when the impulse to speak them had first come to him. Perhaps, indeed, his first feelings of partial remorse for having been unkind to her, and of partial

gratitude to her for sparing him any fresh reproaches, were becoming lost by this time in another feeling that was getting roused in him, and that was largely composed of irritation against her. For she had always till now been so gentle and submissive to him that, even though he was willing to allow that he had given her cause for vexation, he almost felt it like an unwarrantable thing that she should take offence at him, and treat him with this novel coldness and indifference.

He rose from his seat more than half resolved not to say the words to her that he had meant to say. If she felt no desire for reconciliation, why should he press reconciliation on her? If she chose to be indifferent, why should he try to rouse emotion in her, seeing that her passion, when awakened, was an element that, on the whole, rather disturbed him? Was it not perhaps best to leave her alone, and let time gradually bring her back, as he had little doubt it would, to her natural humour?

He returned to the drawing-room, and lingered there, half uncertain what he meant to do for a few minutes: but when these few minutes were ended, he quietly went away to his study. That seemed so much the easiest thing to do that he did it. They only met again once, for a little while, late in the evening. After it had got nearly dark he came

once more to the drawing-room, and found her sitting with the lamp lighted, reading. He had stayed in his room till after sunset, half expecting that she would come to him there, but she did not come; then for a quarter of an hour he had gone into the garden, but he did not find her there.

When he re-entered the drawing-room at last and found that she was reading, without a word he took up a book and read too. Neither of them spoke to the other till after ten minutes he made some irritable remark about the lamp burning badly. He put his hand over his eyes as he spoke, as if he were tired. Perhaps he meant the movement as an invitation to her, if she would have accepted it, to say something sympathizing or caressing to him, but she merely laid down her book for a moment, and asking—"Would you rather have candles?" rose up and lighted a pair; and then resumed her chair and her occupation.

He had put down his book on his knee, and for some minutes after the candles were lighted he did not take it up again. He sat with his hand shading his face, and she knew that he was expecting her to offer some further consolation to him; but she turned the pages of her book (though her heart yearned to go to him), and offered him no consolation.

In another half hour the clock over the mantelpiece struck ten, and then he took out his watch and wound it up.

"I am very tired to-night," he said abruptly.

"Are you? Had you not better go to bed then?" she replied.

And then he made no answer, but after a minute or two he rose up and left the room.

As he went away he would not perhaps have acknowledged that he was upset by her coldness to him, but in reality he *was* upset by it. He had been willing to be friends with her, and she had not been willing to be friends with him, and he went upstairs with a half-defined feeling that she was injuring him. To give him his due, he had not been happy during these days that she had spent in town. He had been angry with himself, and he had missed her; he had thought more than he supposed he should have thought of her return. But he had believed, and had liked to believe, that she would return penitent and tender—ready at a word to forgive him, and to take more than half the blame of their quarrel on herself, and it had taken him curiously aback to find that she had not returned in this mood at all. It had disturbed him more than he would at all have allowed as yet even to himself that it had done.

CHAPTER XII.

THE next morning, which was Sunday, as they were sitting at breakfast, Norah asked her husband if he was going to church with her, and he answered shortly—"No." She made no farther inquiry, and presently they separated, and did not meet again till evening. He went out early in the afternoon, and only returned at six o'clock.

"Have you been walking?" she asked him after he came back.

"No, I was in town," he replied.

There was almost a challenging accent in his answer. He did not *say* he had been at Mrs. Elton's, but she knew from his tone that he had been there as well as if he had told her in so many words, and she knew too—with a pain sharp enough to bring the colour to her face—that he meant her to know it. He intended, she felt, to punish her that way. It was as if he had said defiantly—"Yes—I have been to Mrs. Elton's; and you may thank yourself for driving me there."

But though she understood all this, she made no reply to him.

"Do you know," the widow had said to him as he had sat talking to her an hour or two before in Brook Street—"Do you know that naughty wife of yours would not come to see me when she was in town?" She spoke with quite a pathetic face. "What have I done that she won't like me? I think, and think, and can't find it out. She was very, very kind to me when I was with you—she was kindness itself, but she was glad with all her heart when my visit ended. Oh! yes, I know she was, and *you* know it, and you must tell me why she does not like me?"

And then, with her innocent eyes full of pleading and earnestness, she sat looking at Mr. Langton.

Was it not amusing to play in this way with one's friends? All the world to the widow was a stage, and all the men and women were only actors on it. What had she been doing but acting ever since she first put on long gowns? If life were to be nothing but truth and prose, where would be the sauce to give zest to it?

He knew as well as she did that she was only feigning innocence as she looked in his face. Norah was wrong when, in the soreness of her heart, she thought, as she often did, that her husband was

taken in by Mrs. Elton. He was not taken in by her in the least. Whatever power she might still retain over him, the power of making him believe in her had long been gone. He used to laugh at her often now, when she was acting. He liked to see her do it; he could look on at her performance with a curious sense of admiration; but not Norah herself knew better than he did that in half of the words she spoke, and of the acts she did, there was not a grain of truth.

He had not gone near her during those days that Norah had spent in town. She had expected that he would go, but he had disappointed her expectations. He would not have gone, even on this Sunday, if Norah—as he chose to put it to himself—had not driven him to do it. Norah chanced to make some slight remark, as they sat together at dinner, about the sermon she had heard at church, and as she spoke he burst into a scornful laugh.

"It does not occur to you, of course, that you could by possibility have employed your morning better than you did?" he asked her sarcastically.

She looked at him, and made no answer for a few moments; then she merely said, in a low voice—

"I think it is quite possible I might have employed it better. We often make mistakes."

"I thought *you never* made any," he said bitterly.

And then the colour came, and she made no reply.

Perhaps he had expected that she would answer him, and when she did not, but presently left the room, and left him alone in it, he somehow felt instinctively that, though she had not replied to his threat, the victory did not remain with him. He had flung his gibe at her, and she had simply disregarded it.

He went to his study, and threw himself into his chair there, feeling ill enough at ease. After half an hour Norah opened the door, and asked him if he would come to tea, and he came; but after drinking his tea in silence he went back to his own room. All the rest of the evening he continued to sit there by himself. Long after it was dusk he remained without lights. Though he did not put it into definite words, he half thought that if he waited long enough his wife would come again to him; but the twilight deepened into night, and his solitude remained undisturbed.

He called for candles at last, and then went on reading. It was past eleven o'clock when Norah at last came to the door once more, and spoke to him.

"I am going to bed," she said. "I suppose there is nothing that you want?"

He looked up at her, and made no answer for a moment; then all at once—perhaps his good angel prompting him—he put out his hand to her.

"Why have you never come all night to speak to me?" he said abruptly.

She stood still, holding the door with one hand. What could she say?

"Shut the door a moment," he said, "and come here."

She closed it slowly, and went to him. He was still holding out his hand, and he took hers when she came to his side.

"Are you still so angry with me, Norah?" he asked her.

"No, I am not angry," she answered, in a low voice.

"You ought not to bear a grudge against me for a few hasty words."

He drew her down as if to kiss her, but she moved her face away.

"Why do you want to kiss me?" she said, quickly. "Kisses mean nothing where there is no love,—and you have no love for me." And then she took her hand away from him, and went back a step.

He sat looking at her for a few moments, too much confounded for his amazement not to be visible on his face. A sudden impulse to be friends with her had made him address her—a feeling of loneliness—an undefined feeling that he wanted her. That she should reject his advances—that when he subdued his own pride enough to call her she should refuse to answer his call—this was a position of things for which no former experience he had had of her had prepared him.

She had gone back a step; she paused a few seconds after she had disengaged her hand from him, and then she said quietly—

"I merely came in to tell you that I am going to bed. I think we have nothing to say to one another. Let us keep as far as possible from making each other angry. I suppose that is all that we can hope to do now."

And then without waiting for him to answer her she turned away, leaving him—not able to read much more that night.

The postman brought a sheet or two of proof to him next morning, and as he was gathering up his letters after breakfast she said to him—

"Shall you want me to read those with you presently?"

"No, thank you; I can do them by myself," he answered, shortly, and left the room.

Perhaps as he went away he thought, unreasonably, that she might have repeated the offer of her help, but she did not repeat it. So he went to his study, and read his proof alone, and his work had never seemed to him so little satisfactory. He went twice over the sheets, and then with a feeling of discontent put them away into his desk.

"I must try to touch this up a little presently. It is poorer than I had thought," he said to himself, in a vexed way.

He had some letters to write, and he took up a sheet of paper, and dipped his pen into the ink, and then paused suddenly, and with the pen in his hand sat for a long time doing nothing. This mood of his wife's had begun seriously to disturb him. He wrote two notes of a dozen lines each after a long time, and then threw down his pen, and rose up. The sun was shining, and he took his hat and went out of doors. He passed within a few steps of Norah as he crossed the garden, and she asked him if he was going for a walk, but he merely made some half inaudible answer, and they went their separate ways, without another word.

She had a little note of his which she carried in her pocket-book,—the tenderest he had ever

written her. She had been reading it just before she spoke to him, that, womanlike, she might contrast her present pain with the gladness that had been hers once; she had it folded in her hand still as she asked him her cold question.

He took his walk, and while he was away she went to his room, and set his table straight, and did the little offices for him that no one since they had been married had ever done in his study except herself. He saw the traces of her work when she came back, but she herself was gone then.

She had always hitherto been used, whenever he was out alone, to watch for his coming back, ready —after even the shortest absence—to greet and welcome him; but now in this new order of things she left him to perform his exits and his entries alone. She had no greeting to give him to-day when he came back from his solitary ramble, and weary and gloomy he shut himself again into his empty room.

He was angry with her. He was willing to allow that he had given her cause for dissatisfaction, but he said to himself that she was taking an unwomanly and an ungenerous revenge upon him. And so—nursing his indignation for the remainder of the afternoon—when dinner was ended, without saying a word to her, he went out again, and the clock had struck twelve before, sitting listening, she

heard at last the opening and reclosing of the gate, and his step along the garden-path.

She had sent the servants to bed, so she went to the hall herself and let him in. Perhaps there was something in her face that almost forced him as he entered to say a half grudging word to her.

"I am sorry to have kept you up. It is later than I had thought it was," he said.

"It does not matter," she replied.

He passed her and went into the drawing-room, and when she had locked the door she followed him.

"Mrs. Elton wants us to dine there on Thursday," he said abruptly, almost as soon as she had entered the room.

"Does she? And have you said you will go?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"I suppose you did not give her any answer for me?"

"I told her you were disengaged, and I had no doubt you could go."

"I am sorry for that, as you might have been sure I should *not* go. But it does not matter. I will write to her to-morrow," she said in a tone of indifference.

"What do you mean that you will write and say?" He asked this quickly.

"That I shall not dine at her house," she said.

"I request that you will not do that, Norah."

"I am sorry if you object to my doing it, but it will have to be done, either by you or me," she said. And then she began to put aside her work, and after two or three moments' silence—"I think it will be the simplest for you to let *me* write," she said quietly.

He was standing on the hearthrug looking at her, and his face during these last moments had been growing very dark. After her last words she waited for a second or two, as if expecting his answer; and all at once it came, with angry vehemence.

"Norah, I warn you to have a care of what you are doing! What scheme you have in your head I do not pretend to know, but let me tell you you are playing a dangerous game."

"Shall I write to Mrs. Elton?" she merely asked again, taking no notice of his outbreak.

"What do I care what you do?" he answered passionately; and then neither of them spoke again.

"I shall break my own heart if this goes on, and never reach by a hair's breadth nearer to his," she thought to herself as she went sadly upstairs; and when she reached her room, where he could not see her, she sat down and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XIII.

THERE was nothing more said between Mr. Langton and Norah on the subject of the widow's invitation, so Norah wrote her note of excuse, and Mr. Langton fulfilled his engagement alone. He went to Brook Street, and returned from it silently enough. "Did you have a party?" Norah asked him when he came back; and he only answered shortly, "There were three or four people there;" and then sat down, for it was still not late, and took up a book.

He looked weary enough and sad enough as he sat so, attempting or pretending to read. His evening's entertainment had apparently failed to raise his spirits; he had gone to it possibly without much satisfaction, and had returned from it, it seemed, with less. Perhaps, as he sat with his eyes on his book, he was blaming Norah for his discontent, and in his heart lading her with reproaches that an unbiassed spectator might rather have thought would have been more justly bestowed on Mrs. Elton or himself. But men whose wives have been to them

for a time what Norah had been to Mr. Langton, naturally, I suppose, feel injured when the poor souls who have hitherto been satisfied with small consideration and regard, turn suddenly round and assert their independence and their rights. This was the thing that Norah had done, and, conscious though Mr. Langton was of faults committed against her, with that consciousness was deeply mingled a belief that he was an injured and much to be pitied man.

They had both sat in silence, he reading, she working, for twenty minutes, before he suddenly put his book down, and lifting up his head, unexpectedly addressed her.

"Norah, everything is out of gear between us," he said sadly. "I don't know what it all means. Can we not be friends?"

She looked up to him, but made no answer for a moment; then—

"How can I tell you?" she said, in a low voice. "*You* ought to know that."

"I don't know what it is you want from me." He went on speaking in an injured tone. "I have made more than one effort to conciliate you, but you will not take a step to meet me."

"What kind of efforts have you made?" she asked him quickly. "You offered one night to kiss

me, and I declined to let you kiss me. If that is the advance that you accuse me of rejecting, you are right—I did reject it."

"You not only rejected that advance—you have rejected many others besides that. I don't know what you mean by it," he said, his tone growing hot. "Is it your intention—do you think it is possible—that we should go on leading such a life as we are leading now?"

"Whose fault is it that we are leading such a life?" she said. "It is not mine."

"It *is* yours, most assuredly. We have not come to be on these terms with one another by any will of mine."

"The terms on which we are now are only, as you well know, a natural consequence of what went before; and what went before was your doing, not mine," she replied.

And then they were both silent. If she had answered what he had said differently, she might by this time have had her arms about his neck; but though she longed to go to him she would not answer him differently.

She did not take up her work again; they both sat in silence for a minute, and then—for, calmly as she had tried to speak, her heart was hot within

her—with the colour coming into her face she suddenly addressed him again.

"You seem to think," she said, "that nothing has happened between us that a few smooth words are not to gloss over. I suppose, if I did not care to be true with you, I should pretend to accept what you began just now by saying, as if I thought your mere regret that we are not friends was a fair amends for whatever wrong you may have done me; but I do not think it is a fair amends—I do not think it is *any* amends at all; I do not think that at this moment the making of real amends is possible to you. I mean—for you force me to speak plainly—that as long as you care for the society of another woman more than you care for mine you cannot undo the wrong that you have made me suffer—and for so long there can neither be union nor friendship between us. I suppose you think me both hard and exacting to say this," she added after a moment or two's pause; "and—I don't know—perhaps I may be both; but at any rate if I am to be honest I can only speak in this way."

She rose up with these last words. The colour, as I said, had risen into her face—the fire had come into her eyes. Yielding to a quick—almost, as it seemed, an involuntary—impulse, she all at once went to her husband's side.

"You think I wronged you," she said suddenly, and with her voice quivering, "when I rejected your kiss the other night. Well, I kiss you now to make up for that,"—and suddenly with a passionate pressure she kissed him—"but I will never kiss you again till my lips are dearer to you than the lips of any other woman."

She broke all at once into a sob, and hurriedly turned away. He had taken her hand as if to keep her, but she tore it from him: he called her, but she went away without answering his call. She went from the room, and left only her empty place, and the echo in the air of her words, and the feeling of her impassioned kiss. A strange, vehement, bitter kiss—that had thrilled him as no kiss or touch of hers before had ever done. His cheek burned where it had pressed him; he sat still for a long time after she had gone away, recalling it—not able to forget it.

She was calm enough again on the following morning; she was almost indeed, it seemed to him, more like her old self than she had been before this sudden outbreak. She talked to him as they sat at breakfast about indifferent things; she was self-possessed and cheerful. In the course of the morning from his study window he saw her in the garden, and some feeling, he hardly knew of what

sort, made him go out and join her. They walked up and down for ten minutes, talking of the flowers and fruit.

"I must go back to my work," he said at the end of that time; and then, when a few moments had passed and she made no answer—"Are you too busy to come for a little and sit with me?" he asked her abruptly.

"I am not busy," she answered.

"Those trees will need pruning in the autumn," he said next moment, and they went back to the house talking again about their garden.

Without renewing his invitation he returned to his study, and she went another way. He sat down once more at his desk, and resumed his writing; but though he went on writing he knew, with a half feeling of vexation, a half feeling of amazement, that his ear was watching for the sound of her step, or of her hand upon the door. He rose up once, and set a chair she liked in the window in readiness for her coming; but the time passed, and she did not come. His writing after a little while did not go well; he sat idle at last,—thinking, with little enough satisfaction, of both himself and her.

She opened the door about two o'clock to ask him if he would have some lunch, and he answered shortly—

"No."

"You had better at least have a biscuit," she said; and when he made no reply to that suggestion, she went away, and, returning again in a few moments, brought a plate of biscuits in one hand, and in the other a book. She set the plate beside him, and then, without speaking, went to the chair he had placed for her, and sat down and began to read.

After that, a couple of hours passed in silence. At the two hours' end, for the first time he opened his lips.

"I have a letter to post. I think I will go out with it," he said.

"Yes, it is a beautiful afternoon," she answered, raising her head. "It is a pity for you to be all day indoors."

He wiped his pen and rose up. He stood for a minute setting a few books straight upon his table; then suddenly he said—

"Will you come with me?"

"I think not," she answered.

He bit his lip, and did not speak again. And then her heart reproached her. Did she not *want* to go with him? But she forced herself to sit still and make no other answer to him.

She said to herself when he was gone—"I have

made him angry now, and to show me that he is angry, I suppose he will go back to Mrs. Elton." But at an hour's end the glad colour came into her face, for she heard his step again in the hall. She was not in the study then. She had gone back to the drawing-room. She heard him return to his own room with a thankful heart.

It had been very difficult to Norah, when she first came back from Miss Etheridge's, to unite the coldness and reserve that she wished to show towards her husband with any degree of general ease or cheerfulness. She had been eager not to take up the attitude of a martyr, or to wear a look of tragic woe; and yet during the first week after her return she knew that she in reality *was* always wearing a look of woe. She was making her husband's house gloomy to him, and she did not want to make it gloomy.

She had taken herself to task for this, but she had taken herself to task hitherto almost in vain, for her mind was one slow to accustom itself to new positions, and being anxious and sad (and being also by nature very little of an actress), she had found it a hard thing to seem indifferent when she was not indifferent, and at ease when she was full of trouble. But to-day for the first time a feeling had somehow begun to come to her of power to

play the part that she had set herself; for the first time she had felt herself almost at home in the changed circumstances of her life—she had felt herself, at least, not mastered and crushed by them. Something which, distant and dim as it was, was perhaps hope, had taken birth in her, and given her, at any rate, a portion of the strength and the self-possession that she needed for her task.

This evening, after dinner, she talked for a good while to her husband about ordinary things. She was sitting sewing near one of the drawing-room windows—it was a French window—and he stood all the time they talked leaning against the open half of it. It was talk that was merely words, and nothing more, but it flowed easily; there was hardly any break in it—there were no jars. A stranger sitting by would scarcely have guessed, perhaps, that these two were husband and wife, but neither would he have guessed that there was a great unhealed division and quarrel between them.

He stepped out into the garden at last, and then she went on with her work in silence. He did not ask her again to go with him; perhaps he would have liked her to offer to go, but she did not offer. After half an hour, he came back with something for her to look at—a moth with rich painted wings, and he put it under a glass while they examined it together.

"Better give him his liberty again," she said after a few minutes; and then she resumed her work, and he carried his moth with him back to the open air. She knew from the expression of his lips as he went from her this second time that he was angry because she again let him go alone; but she sat still and allowed him to be angry.

The sun was nearly setting, and she went on doing her work till it got dusk; then in the twilight he came in in silence, but merely crossed the room and went to his own study. A few minutes afterwards he rang for lights, and sat by himself for the rest of the evening; and she also lighted her lamp and sat alone.

"Shall I go and see what he is doing?" she said to herself an hour or two afterwards; and after hesitating for a little while she went, and found him writing.

"You are not working so late at night, are you, Roger?" she said to him.

He made no reply for a moment or two, and then he said coldly—

"I am doing nothing of any importance." And he paused for a moment, and after that pause added hurriedly and bitterly—"But *you* would not care though I were."

"Put down your pen, and come into the drawing-

room," she said. She took no notice of his last words.

"I am going to bed in a few minutes," he answered curtly.

"Are you? Then you must be tired," she said.

"Yes—I am very tired."

A month or two ago, if he had made her such a reply as this, how anxiously she would have gone to him—with what a tender face she would have caressed and questioned him! She did not go to him nor caress him now. She merely looked at him for a moment or two (he did not see her eyes as she looked), and then in a quiet voice—

"If you are tired I would certainly, if I were you, not sit up," she said. "Why have you gone on writing so long?"

"Is there a bedroom-candle there?" he asked coldly without answering her.

"Yes—I will bring you one."

She brought him a candle, and then he told her to put it down—not to light it—he was not ready for it yet; so she put it down; and went away. She heard him go upstairs a quarter of an hour afterwards, and she let him go without following him. She only said to herself as she listened to his step—

"I have set myself a hard task!"

CHAPTER XIV.

One afternoon, ten days or so after her return from town, Norah had a call from Mrs. Elton. The widow came in overflowing with affection—and excuses. Did her dear friends think she had forgotten them? Ah, she never forgot—never! but she had been so busy—so overwhelmed with engagements. Oh, how peaceful it was here at Highgate—her dear, dear Highgate, where she had been so happy. How she had been longing to come back to it! "Every day I have been trying to call," she said, "and I have been saying to myself that you must think me the most ungrateful creature in the world. If I had not had my own little grievance—my own little complaint against *you*—I should have been quite ashamed of myself. But ah, you naughty girl, why didn't you come to my party?—my poor little party that was got up on purpose for you and Mr. Langton,"—and the widow put on a face of such tender reproach that Norah could not answer without a laugh.

It was early in the afternoon, and Mrs. Elton had come to "make a long visitation," she said.

Her coachman should put up her horses, if Norah would let him, and she and Mrs. Langton would have such a delightful chat. Would it not be charming?—just like one of the dear past days come back again. So she settled this, and then established herself under a tree in the garden, near enough to that part of the house in which the study was for her voice to enter well through the open window; and in ten minutes—well, in ten minutes it was Mr. Langton, and not Norah, that she was chatting to so delightfully. Norah was busy, perhaps, and Mr. Langton had taken his wife's place on the second chair under the tree.

"Am I taking you away from your work? You must not let me do that, you know—if it is your duty to go on working," said the widow, with a pretty, reluctant look, after this arrangement had gone on pleasantly for a little while.

"There is no duty in the matter," he answered, carelessly.

"Is there not? Oh, then, I am glad. I do so hate that dreadful word *duty*. Of course it is a shocking thing to say so, but I do. Only you mustn't tell upon me. You won't tell," she asked—"will you?"

"Who am I likely to tell, do you think?" he said.

"Oh, I don't know; but, I mean, you mustn't tell

*any*body—not even Norah. You know I am always terribly afraid of saying naughty things before Norah. She is so proper and good."

"So different from you and me, I suppose?"

"Yes, I am afraid so; or, at least—yes, she's different; but we don't mean any harm you know."

"Oh, no—only the harm of being no better than our neighbours."

The widow's ear was sometimes a little blunt in catching shades of tone. She did not perceive that Mr. Langton spoke ironically.

"Yes. One doesn't want to set up as being better than the rest of the world, you see."

"Not to assume a monopoly in virtue, you mean?"

"No, that is a hateful thing! I can't endure people who do that."

"People like Norah?" he said quietly.

"Oh, of course I don't mean Norah." But Mrs. Elton coloured, and answered rather precipitately, and with her next words adroitly changed the conversation.

She spent two very pleasant hours at Highgate. At least, she *said* she enjoyed them immensely, and she clung to Norah, and almost wept over her when she went away.

"This is my little oasis—my green oasis in the *desert*," she said.

"Is London the desert? Seeing how many people you know there, I should scarcely have thought that was a good term to apply to it," Norah replied, prosaically; and then Mrs. Elton tapped her cheek, and said she was a naughty girl.

"Yes, a naughty girl, who has no pity for us poor strugglers in that great restless Babel over there. Ah, my dear, I am afraid happiness makes us very selfish; it makes even *you* hard-hearted," said the widow, sighing, and shaking her head; and then she tripped out into the garden, and went into a little rapture over the scent of the roses and mignonette.

Mr. Langton walked with her to the gate.

"How sweet it all is! When shall I be here again?" she exclaimed to him pathetically.

"What is to prevent you coming again? You are not leaving town yet, are you?" Mr. Langton asked.

"Oh, no. I shall not go anywhere till August; but you know how it is; you know what a rush life is, and how seldom one gets to do the things one wants."

"I thought *you* always did the things you wanted."

"I? Oh, how little you know!" And then the widow gave another sigh that seemed to come quivering up from the very depths of her heart.

He turned and broke off a rosebud or two from a bush that they were passing.

"Look, these are a fine colour, are they not?" he said; and he gave them to her, and they talked about the flowers till they reached the garden door.

As soon as they came to this door he opened it; he went forward to the carriage and opened the door of that too. She might have been willing to linger, perhaps, but he chose not to give her the choice of lingering. All she could do was to detain him for a minute after she had taken her seat.

"When are you coming to see me again?" she asked him suddenly, as she gave her hand to him.

"I don't know," he said.

"But I want you to know." She lifted up her eyes pleadingly to his face. "Come soon."

"Good-bye," he said.

"*Won't* you?" she asked.

"Very likely. I can't tell. Good-bye," he repeated.

And then, with a momentary look of reproach, and as if unwillingly, she said "Good-bye," and he closed the carriage-door.

"Why should I not go to see her? She would give me more of a welcome, at any rate, than I get in my own house," he said to himself, bitterly, as he turned indoors.

Norah was in the drawing-room, but he did not go in there—he went straight to his study. As he sat down again at his desk, he was, curiously, thinking more of his wife than of Mrs. Elton; the widow had been spending her sweetness on him for a couple of hours, and yet it was not with pleasure of her sweetness that he was thinking as he sat down, but, with a sense of soreness and anger, of Norah and Norah's obduracy.

In these days his wife made him angry often enough, and his indignation had the effect of keeping her wonderfully in his thoughts. If he could have been angry once for all, and have determined that her conduct was unjustifiable, and then, to some extent, as an evil that had simply to be endured, have dismissed it from his mind, the thing would not have so much troubled him; but somehow he could not do this, and the little trifling jars of each fresh day,—each repetition of offence,—each separate recalling, in look, or act, or word, of the division she had set between them, fretted him, and rankled in his heart. Like a man with a raw wound, he was sore, and the slightest touch on the sore place galled him. Perhaps it ought not in reason to have vexed him much that a woman whom he had never loved with anything but the calmest affection should declare her independence of him in this way that Norah

was doing; but he had got used to her service and her worship, and the withdrawal of them gave a blow to his vanity, if to nothing else.

Was it possible, too, that he cared for her more than he knew he did? He used to watch her silently in these days, and with a strange kind of pertinacity. He had always admired her in a grave, slightly critical way; she was handsome, and, though her beauty had never touched him like Mrs. Elton's, still it had always given him pleasure. She had a dignified grace about her that he liked. Yet he never before had followed her movements as he did now —not even in the days when he had first become her lover.

He was angry enough with her often, but sometimes in his loneliness he had a vague longing for her. He knew very well that he missed her former tenderness—that for his comfort's sake he wanted it again; he looked back with distinct regret to the days when she had seemed as if she only cared to live that she might serve him; he began to think at moments that possibly he had valued those days too little.

They seemed to have gone far enough from him now. He put his hand once upon her shoulder, and she quietly took a step aside, and forced him to remove it; if he ever came so near her as to touch

her she went back from him as if he were a stranger; if he ever spoke to her, using a tone or words that seemed to imply reproach or regret for the coldness that there was between them, she never answered him. From morning till night, and day after day, she was the same to him—not hard to deal with, not sad or silent or resentful, but simply like a sealed book. And he on his part was angry, and thought himself wronged, and gave back coldness (for the most part); but yet, as the weeks went on, gradually some feeling arose in his heart for her that had not been in his heart of old.

Her twenty-fourth birthday came on one day during these weeks. He knew it was her birthday, and kept it in his mind without speaking till evening. It was only then that, coming to her, he took her hand, and put a ring on one of her fingers.

"Why do you do this?" she asked him, in a tone of surprise.

"Is not to-day your birthday?" he answered.

"Yes; but you need not have minded that," she said. "The ring is very pretty—but I am sorry you have bought it."

"You don't care for any presents from me now," he said bitterly.

"No. I don't care much for presents from you now," she coldly answered.

And then, when she said this, without a word he turned from her, and went hastily out of the room.

Her heart was beating fast; she put the ring to her lips when he was gone. "My darling!" she said sadly. She said to herself after a minute, "I will not wear it. He will be angry if I do not; but it is best not to mind that." And so she sat looking at her ring, and touching it tenderly for a little while; and then she was about to draw it from her finger; but, when it came to the moment, she could not do it. Yet, though she wore it, she said no word about it to him again.

She never on her part reproached him for anything; whatever reproaches were ever uttered came always from him, and always, if it was possible, she simply disregarded them. At times, however, it was not possible for her to disregard them. One day, on one of these occasions, she said to him—

"Why should you use a tone of complaint? Can you alter anything by saying hard things to me? You make a position for yourself, and then you rebel against it. It seems to me that is foolish." And then, with a momentary sign of feeling, "If there can be nothing else between us, can you not, at least, let there be kindness?" she asked.

"You are easily contented if *that* will satisfy

you," he answered, sharply; and then she made no reply, but something that was almost like joy came to her heart. Was kindness between them beginning to seem so poor a thing to *him* too that the suggestion of it had become cause enough to ruffle him? She took his angry answer like some great treasure to her breast, and wept in her gladness over it. But she did not let him see her tears.

On a morning early in August one of Mrs. Elton's perfumed notes came to Highgate, announcing that the widow was leaving town.

"I want to come and see you, but every hour—every moment is engaged," she wrote. "Will you be kind and come to me?—or must I merely say good-bye on paper?"

"On paper—by all means," said Norah to herself, as soon as she read this inquiry; and lest Mrs. Elton should unexpectedly find a spare hour, and reach Highgate before the day was over, she despatched her reply instantly. But Mr. Langton went to town, and made his adieux in person, and—busy though she was—it was surprising with what apparent ease the widow was able to devote the whole of an evening to him.

"I have come to say good-bye to you—but I must not take up your time," he said to her as he

entered her drawing-room; but she at once responded to that greeting with a pretty little half reproach.

"If I have time for anything, do you think I have not time for my friends?" she said; and then she gave him both her hands, and looked the sweetest smile into his face.

She talked to him all the evening; she would not hear of his leaving her.

"I have nothing to do—nothing," she declared, quite forgetting the words of her little note to Norah in the morning. "I had just been wishing and hoping you would come in. I have had such a stupid day, and—and it is so nice to get a little bit of talk with a friend at the end of it."

So she sat with her lovely face before him, and talked to him for a couple of hours. At the end of these two hours he said good-bye to her. She had entertained him well enough, but in the bottom of his heart he knew that he was weary of her—that he was glad she was going away. She had been to him what no other woman had ever been; but a man does not worship the same woman twice. He had worshipped this one with his neck under her feet once; he had attempted to act over something like the old play a second time, but the scenes had dragged, and the curtain was falling now, and he was yawning. He walked home when he had left

her, and thought to himself that in these last six months he had been a fool.

It seemed to him, when he reached his own house, that Norah's face looked white and worn.

"Are you tired, child?" he said to her, after they had been together for a few minutes.

He was leaning against the mantelpiece, looking at her; if he had not known that she would have rejected it, he would have held out his hand to her. Sometimes of late there had come moments when, with a strangely irritable feeling, that was half made up of tenderness, half of anger, he had wanted to bring her near him—to make her come to him—his own impotency to do what he desired making the desire keener. It came to him now as he stood looking at her,—knowing, with a sharp, sore consciousness, that he could not cross those six feet of ground that parted him from her.

She lifted her head for a moment as he asked his question.

"Tired? No, not specially," she answered.

"Well, you look as if you were," he said. And then, after a moment, "What have you been doing all night?"

"Reading—for the most part," she replied.

"You have had a peaceful evening, then?"

"Yes."

"More peaceful than if I had been here, perhaps?"

"Your being here would not have made much difference."

"No," he broke out, with a sudden bitter laugh, "it would not have made much difference. That is an admirably frank answer. Your husband's presence does not affect you much one way or the other now, Norah."

"Did Mrs. Elton tell you when she is going?" she asked.

"Never mind Mrs. Elton. Can't you answer my question?"

"You did not ask me any question. You said that your presence did not affect me much. That is not a question, but an assertion."

"Whatever it is, you can reply to it."

"I have nothing to reply to it."

And then he gave another laugh, harder than the first, and turned suddenly round to the fire, and stood so that she could not see his face.

She had been reading, and her book was on the table at her side. For five minutes she sat leaning her forehead on her hand. Could any words say how in her heart she was longing to rise and go to him,—to put her arms about his neck—to tell him that he was all the world to her—that his presence

made all the difference to her between light and darkness? Knowing how she loved him, it seemed to herself like the wildest jest that he should pretend to doubt her love, or in his heart for a moment believe that her assumed coldness was anything but a mask. "He shall care for my love before I show it to him again," she had said to herself, but the supposition that he could really think her indifferent had never even crossed her mind. It was only of late that she had so much as *begun* to take in the fact which was so strange to her—that he could think her affection for him was gone.

There had been a long pause between them when at last he turned from the fire, and began to speak to her in a cold angry voice.

"Norah, you are an unforgiving woman," he said harshly. "I give you credit for many virtues, but you have that one failing, for which no virtue can make up. A man may well pray God to help him when he has married a wife who thinks herself immaculate."

"I am sorry," she said in a low voice, "if I have given you cause to suppose that I think myself immaculate. What I really think myself is something so different that such an accusation seems to me like a thing said in mockery."

He burst into a scornful laugh, and without

replying to her turned away from the fire, and, taking his bedroom candle, lighted it. Then suddenly he paused again, and before he left the room—

"People sometimes learn wisdom as they grow old," he said. "If you ever live to have a second husband, Norah, take my advice and pursue a different course with him from the one you are following with your first."

"Roger—hush!" she cried out quickly.

The fire flashed into her eyes as she suddenly lifted them up—the fire, and perhaps the tears too; but he went to the door without looking at her, and perhaps without hearing the sob she gave as it closed behind him.

"I might have made some answer to his kindness. I might have shown a little—ah, just one little—touch of tenderness to him!" for a few minutes she went thinking remorsefully and passionately, and it was not till a long time had passed that she could check her weeping, and could say to herself—"I ought not to be sorry. I ought rather to thank God that he feels my coldness enough to be made so sore by it."

"We never value what we win too easily," she had said already to herself a thousand times.

CHAPTER XV.

It was early in August when the widow had left town. One evening in October, Mr. Forrester, who brought himself and his kindly garrulous talk not unfrequently to Highgate, chanced, as he sat with Norah, to begin mysteriously to hint at some piece of news concerning her.

"What do you hear of Ethel Elton, Mrs. Langton?" he inquired; and, when Norah answered that she heard nothing, the old man at once fell to chuckling and rubbing his hands.

"Ah! that's just what I expected—nobody hears anything!" he exclaimed, as if Norah's reply had given him extreme delight. "She wrote a note to Susan the other day, and there weren't a dozen lines in it. Oh! I guessed how it would be as soon as ever I heard where she was going to spend her autumn. She's not thinking of *us;* depend upon it she has her pretty little head full of other things." And Mr. Forrester laughed to himself, and looked at Norah with a twinkle in his eyes.

Mr. Langton, as well as Norah, was in the room.

There was a moment's silence after the old man's speech (for the subject of the widow was one upon which Norah was not fond of talking), and then it was Mr. Langton, and not Norah, who made an answer to it.

"What do you mean that her head is full of? Is she going to be married?" he asked bluntly.

The sudden question made Norah's heart leap. *She* had wanted to ask that question too, but in her husband's presence her tongue had refused to ask it. Now, when *he* put it instead of her, she sat silent, hardly breathing for a moment or two.

Mr. Forrester began to cough. "Oh, well—ahem!—I—I don't quite know if that is a fair question. I'm a little afraid—only, to be sure, we're all friends, and there's no harm in telling a guess—and, after all, it's been no secret for months past that young Heathcote has been over head and ears in love with her."

"Young Heathcote! Oh, is *he* the man?" said Mr. Langton, with a momentary rather contemptuous laugh.

"Well, you know, I can't say—I only mean that, when she's staying at his place, it looks suspicious. She has been there for these five weeks past. But you mustn't take it as a fact, remember," cried the kindly old gossip eagerly. "I only tell you my own

thought in the matter, and as for one's feeling about it—well, Tom Heathcote is not a bad fellow; he's a far better fellow than Elton was, and I'm not sure but if she married him she might be happier than she has ever been yet. Poor girl! I should like her to have a good husband, for she's a nice creature —as pretty a creature and as sweet-tempered a one as ever I knew. That's no more than the truth—is it, Langton?"

"I never heard anybody question her beauty, certainly," Mr. Langton said.

"Nor her good temper—did you?"

"No, nor her good temper. She could always smile at a man and be perfectly sweet to him when" —Mr. Langton paused for a moment, and then ended his sentence with bitter emphasis—"when she was driving him mad."

"Oh, oh! that is too bad. Now if it was not for Mrs. Langton's presence," cried the old man, half laughing, "I could say something about sour grapes. But come,—she was a coquette, of course—we all know that; she tried to turn everybody's head that she could; but, for my own part, let people say what they like, I'm fond of her. She has been very good to me—yes, she has been very kind. Many and many a time since I lost my poor dear wife she has come in to sit and chat with me, and cheer

me, just as Susan might have done. Ah, people speak ill of her—I know that, and she has her faults, but to me she has always been a kind little woman—a nice, kind, pretty, good-natured little woman."

"I can believe that," Norah said heartily, and her assent brought a quick glance towards her from her husband; but he did not speak, and the old man, after a moment, went on again with his maundering talk.

These long visits of Mr. Forrester's were inflictions that Mr. Langton did not always bear with equanimity. He used often, when they occurred, to absent himself from the drawing-room for a large part of the evening, and leave Norah alone to entertain her guest. Norah was naturally patient, and it did not try her to listen to Mr. Forrester's feeble conversation as it tried her husband. On this special evening Mr. Langton left him to her for a long time, retiring to the study almost as soon as he had drunk his coffee, and not moving thence till, at ten o'clock, Norah came to the door and told him Mr. Forrester was going.

Perhaps she too had been weary enough of the long hours to-night, and had found it hard, with [illegible] appearance of interest, to act her part of [illegible]s. The old man talked of many things, and

she was only thinking of one. She was glad when he rose to take his leave, and she had an excuse for going to her husband's room and seeing his face again.

She found him sitting reading, looking undisturbed enough.

"Mr. Forrester is going, Roger," she merely said; "will you come and say good-bye to him?" and, without answering, he rose up and followed her to the drawing-room. He helped the old man on with his coat, and then walked through the garden to the outer door with him. It was a fine moonlight autumn night, and Norah stood at the open house-door, waiting till he came back.

"It is almost full moon—is it not?" she said when he rejoined her.

"Yes—I think it must be. It is a splendid evening," he answered.

He came and leant against the side of the door, seeming as if he was in no hurry to go in. There were a few stars visible, and he began to tell her the names of them. He seemed in a perfectly unruffled, placid humour; they talked about the stars, and then about two or three other things. It was she who made the first move to return indoors, and he followed her slowly, almost with an appearance of unwillingness.

"Are you going back to the study?" she asked him, and then said something about seeing whether his fire needed attending to. She went before him into the room.

"Could you not let your other fire go out and come here?" he suddenly asked her.

"I will, if you like," she answered.

"I don't see why we need sit apart."

"Nor I," she said.

She went back to the drawing-room and put out the lights, and then returned to him.

"I have something here that I should like to read to you—if you cared to hear it," he said as soon as she had sat down; and he began to read, and read for more than an hour. Then they talked for a few minutes, but only of the matters about which he had been reading; and, after that, they fell into silence.

She had been sitting listening, without doing anything. She was sitting idle still, a few steps from him. A minute or two had passed without either of them speaking, when he broke the silence.

"I had been going to say," he began, "that this is better than listening to that old dotard's talk, only"—he stopped abruptly for a moment—"*you* may hardly perhaps be of my opinion."

"Do you think that *I* am so fond of listening to

Mr. Forrester, then?" she said, looking up with a quick laugh.

"I don't think you would need to be very fond of him to prefer his company to mine."

"Do you not?" she said.

She had a frigid, indifferent way, when he accused her of anything, of declining to answer his accusations; she would simply listen to them, and then give them neither her denial nor her assent.

"Can I help thinking it?"

"I don't know," she replied, after a moment. "It would never occur to *me* to do so."

"Not when you lay yourself out to entertain him, and then come and sit here with me like a dumb statue?"

"I beg your pardon if I have been sitting like a statue. I didn't mean to do so. Did I tell you that I had a call to-day from Lucy Harding?" she said, rousing herself; and then for a minute or two she went on talking, telling him about Miss Harding's visit,—while he sat, making no answer, with a frown deepening on his face; till all at once he turned sharply round, and took up his book again, and, exclaiming passionately, "You are enough to drive a man mad!" re-opened it, and began once more to read.

But he only read to himself now, and after a

few minutes she rose and went away. "Does he love me or hate me?" she was thinking to herself as she went. Perhaps he did not love her; and yet as she left him the colour had come into her cheeks; her heart was beating fast; she almost knew that it was not what he had heard of Mrs. Elton to-night that had disturbed his equanimity, but that *she* had disturbed it because she was cold to him.

It used to seem a strange thing to Norah, but again and again during these autumn days she was conscious of a curious gladness springing up in her —an energy and hopefulness both new and sweet. Her husband might accuse her of sitting by him sometimes like a statue; but she was by no means like a statue always when she was with him; she used frequently to talk to him as much as she had ever done; she rarely sought his society, leaving him always rather to seek her; but when they were together, it was he far more than she who was silent. She would often exert herself to talk; if he was languid or depressed she would try to amuse him. She was ready, whenever he required it, to devote her time to him, to give him her services, her attention—everything except (or, in appearance, except) her love.

"I am playing a dangerous game," she said to herself sometimes, and every day, almost every hour,

she used to ask herself, "Shall I lose or win?" If she should win, would any woman in all the world (she thought) be happy with a greater happiness than hers? If she should lose—— "Ah, but I shall not lose!" after a time she began joyously, but yet shyly, to say.

By the time the winter had begun, there had come days when Mr. Langton would scarcely let his wife leave him, even though her company seemed incapable of giving him pleasure. He would sit on those days at his desk, trying to work, but not working,—ready to be angry with her if she spoke to him, and yet resenting her silence if she sat silent; depressed and irritable; contented neither with her presence if she stayed, nor with her absence if she went away.

"Norah, for heaven's sake put away that work!" he broke out to her in a mood of this kind one day. "There is nothing that disturbs me more than to see a woman sewing. Where are you going now?" he added, sharply, as at this address she rose up from her seat.

"I am merely going to the drawing-room," she said.

"Why need you go to the drawing-room? Can you not put your sewing away, and take up a

book? In heaven's name what does your work matter?"

"I can do whatever you like."

"I cannot write a line while you sit stitching."

"Then you cannot be quite well," she said, gently, "and I think it is a pity that you try to write."

"What else would you have me do?" he said wearily.

"Why cannot you read?—or go out? It is a very good morning. Go out and take a walk."

"And then you think you will get me off your hands for a little while?"

"I am sure it would be better for you if you walked more regularly. You are not nearly so well now as you were when you always went out for two or three hours every day."

"No, I am not well."

He spoke dejectedly. He leant back in his chair, and put his hand up to his brow. She stood without speaking for a few moments, and then, with a yearning look in her eyes, she went a little nearer to him.

"Roger, give up working," she said. "Let us go somewhere together. I should like a walk. Shall we go?"

"No, I am not going out," he said shortly.

"Then at least come into the garden. You are tired. You are not fit to work."

"I am always tired," he said.

"I don't like to hear you say that."

For a moment she put her hand upon his shoulder, but only for a moment: in the next she had drawn it back.

"Why do you pretend to care?" he asked her suddenly, with a short, hard laugh.

"There is no pretending in the matter. I do care," she answered, in a low voice.

"I believe that is a lie, Norah!"

"I never told you a lie," she said.

"Oh, no—I forgot you were immaculate. Immaculate people never tell lies, of course."

And then there was silence for a moment or two, till all at once, with a quick change of tone — with a kind of remorseful passion in his voice—

"Norah, forgive me—I am a brute to you," he said hurriedly.

"You are unjust to me," she answered.

"Yes, I am unjust, and everything else that is vile. God knows you have had enough to bear from me. Some women, perhaps, might possibly have borne it differently—that is all."

He turned from her, and took up his pen again;

and she stood still for a moment or two, and then went away.

She went out of the room, meaning not to return, but she could not bear not to return. After ten minutes she took a book and went back to him. He was sitting again by that time doing nothing. As she passed near him he looked up at her and called her.

"Norah, don't let us quarrel," he said, almost wistfully.

"Do you think I ever want to quarrel with you?" she answered.

He put out his hand, and she gave him hers. Holding her by his side, he said to her, after a few moments,

"Are you going to stay with me now?"

"I will do anything you like," she answered.

"You know I like you to be here."

"Then of course I will stay."

"There was a time once"—he said this suddenly—"when you cared to be with me for your own pleasure."

"Yes," she said, almost below her breath.

"But that time is past?"

"The time, you mean, when I was contented to care so much more for you than you did for me? Yes," she said steadily, "that time is past."

"And now you have your revenge?"

"I don't understand you."

"You have come to see *me* want—what you will not give me?"

She turned away her head, with her heart throbbing, and her lips quivering too much for her to speak. She stood so for a few moments, and then she took her hand away from him.

"If you want anything from me that I have not given you I do not know it," she merely said, and she went to her place again and sat down. But she was trembling as she turned away from him; her sudden joy had overwhelmed her; she could not see for a mist of something that was not tears before her eyes. "He does not love me yet," she began to say to herself presently. "It is not love yet;—but surely in a little while!—if I am patient— if I wait;" She bent her head over the book she did not read, and sat so, through half the afternoon, picturing to herself the Promised Land that, as she thought, she should reach soon.

There was a happy tone in her voice that jarred upon him when she at last spoke to him again after a long time.

"There are such beautiful colours on the oak trees," she exclaimed, looking up suddenly and

seeing them. "Do come and look. How lovely they are in this red sunlight!"

"I daresay their loveliness will keep," he answered shortly, not moving from his seat.

"Keep? No, it won't keep. It will only last while the sun shines on them. Roger, come out into the garden. It is so beautiful—and in half an hour more the sun will be gone."

She went to him, and with, for a moment or two, almost a return to her old manner, began to press him to come with her.

"Do come. I want to be out," she said.

"And I have made you feel, I suppose," he said sharply, "that you daren't leave your prison till your jailer gives you leave?"

"Well—not exactly; but I want to go out, and to take my—jailer with me."

"Is that really how you think of me?" he said quickly.

"As a jailer? No—I never thought of you in that way before."

"You only adopt the title now then, you mean, as a suitable one?"

"I don't adopt it. I won't say it again if it vexes you."

"I am afraid you think that everything vexes

me? Well, I daresay it is true. I know I am hard to please."

"I have never said I thought so."

"No—you are a very pattern wife. You never make any complaints. You are a modern Griselda."

"Not long ago you thought I made too many complaints. You were not much disposed to liken me to Griselda then."

"I didn't know as much of you a few months ago as I do now."

"Do you think that even yet you know much of me?"

She asked her question in a low voice. She looked at him, and their eyes met: then with a sudden vehemence and bitterness—

"I know this much at least,—that you are a woman who can heap coals of fire on a man's head!" he broke out.

"Roger, don't say that."

"Don't say it? Why should I not say it? If you are hard enough to do the thing, you are likely enough, I think, to have strength to bear the accusation of doing it."

And then he rose up abruptly and turned away from her; and she stood quite still, without answering him, and let him leave the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

AUTUMN had passed; even the oak-trees had almost shed their russet leaves, and December frosts had come, and still Norah heard and saw nothing of Mrs. Elton, except only once—some time in November—when a chance acquaintance mentioned that she had returned to town. But, though she had returned to town, she did not come to Highgate, nor did Norah go to Brook Street in search of her. Whether Mr. Langton did Norah did not know. Mr. Forrester had gone to winter in the south of France, so from him they heard no news from her; neither from him nor from any other quarter did confirmation come of the report of her intended marriage. At least none came—until one morning, just before Christmas, when, opening the *Times*, and glancing, carelessly and unexpectantly, down its first column, Norah's eyes suddenly fell on this announcement:

"On the 18th, at St. George's, Hanover Square, Ethel, widow of the late Captain F. Elton, R.E., to

Thomas Heathcote, Esq., of Grosvenor Square and Heathcote Park, Hertfordshire."

She was sitting at the breakfast-table, with Mr. Langton opening and reading his letters opposite her, and for a minute she held the paper in her hand, and said nothing to him. For a few moments she almost felt as if she had not courage to say anything. Those five lines had made her heart throb, and brought the colour to her face.

But presently she forced herself to speak.

"Did you expect this, Roger?" she said abruptly. "Here is Mrs. Elton's marriage."

He looked up quickly as she said these words, and, without speaking, held his hand out for the paper. He took it, and read the announcement—read and re-read it perhaps—and then, still in silence, laid it down again. When a few moments more had passed, and he said nothing—

"Did you know that it had been all settled?" she asked him.

"Yes," he merely answered.

"Did she tell you herself?"

"No—I heard it from John Furnival. I saw him one day in town—a fortnight ago."

He said nothing more, nor did she. After another minute he took up the paper again, and began to read one of the leading articles. As soon as

breakfast was ended he gathered his letters together and went to his own room.

Norah and he did not meet again for some hours. She had not courage enough, or rather perhaps insensitiveness enough, to go to him. She could not bear to seem as if she were prying into what he might wish to keep secret from her—to set a watch over him that she might discover his weakness. She left him nearly all the morning to himself, yearning to go to him, but yet too timid to go.

Would Mrs. Elton's marriage move him much? She asked herself if it would a hundred times, longing with a passionate desire to know—longing to be with him that she might get an answer to her question, yet feeling as if she *could* not cross the few steps of ground that kept her from him.

Three hours had passed in this way since they had parted, when, as she sat alone in the dining-room, she at last heard his door open, and the next moment he came into the room, speaking as he entered.

"I have mislaid a letter somehow—that letter that came from Winslow yesterday. Do you know anything about it, Norah?" he said.

"No; but you read it in the study—it must be there," she replied.

"I wish you would come and look for it."

She rose up gladly, and went back to his study with him. He was a man whose papers had a trick of getting into disorder; he was not methodical, and his letters or manuscripts were constantly going astray. She had found things for him that he had lost a hundred times before to-day; to-day, after only two or three minutes' search, she recovered the letter that he had wanted.

He had given up his place at his writing-table to her while she looked for it, and had gone and sat down by the fire with his back to her.

"This is it, I think," she said, after a few minutes.

"Let me see. Yes, that is it. Where did you find it?" and as she gave it to him, he took it and her hand together. "You always find everything for me. What a patient woman you are, Norah!" he said.

"You seem to have become very much impressed with the fact of my patience of late," she answered, with a half laugh.

"Yes, because you show me so much of it. It is the virtue of all others that you give me most of now. Thank you for finding this. I ought to answer it, you know."

"Yes."

"I wish you would answer it for me. I don't know what to say."

"You don't know whether to write the article, do you mean?"

"Yes; if I do it, you see, it must be done almost immediately."

"Well, you could do it almost immediately, could you not?"

"Then you want me to do it?"

"No, I don't mean that."

"You only mean (say it out boldly, Norah) that you don't care what I do?"

"I do care."

"Not you!"

"You have no right to accuse me of indifference, Roger."

"Never mind about right. I have no *right*, I daresay, to accuse you of anything,—or to complain of anything." He looked at her, and then suddenly threw her hand away. "*You* are immaculate, you know, and *I* am——Norah, do you know what I am thinking of doing?" he said abruptly.

"No; how can I guess?"

"I am thinking—I have been thinking for some time—of going abroad."

"Do you mean that seriously?"

"Do you think I look much as if I were jesting?

No, I am serious enough. I think I might go to Berlin for a few months. There are some books there that I should like to see."

"If you would care to go to Berlin, I suppose there is no reason why you should not go."

"No, there is none that I know of."

And then they were both silent.

"You would go and stay with your aunt while I was away, I suppose?" he said abruptly after that pause.

"Why do you say that?" she asked. "If you went to Berlin, why should you go without me?"

"The whole object of my going at all would be to go without you," he answered roughly.

And then the colour came to her face, and her heart came to her lips, and she made no answer.

They neither of them spoke for several minutes, till, with a wistful, weary face he turned to her, and held out his hand to her again.

"My wife, do you quite hate me?" he said passionately.

"Hate you!" she repeated.

She lifted up her eyes: the tears flashed into them; in another moment would not one or the other of them have said some words that must have ended this long division? but just at this moment

one of the servants opened the door, and summoned Norah from the room.

"There is a young person in the hall who wants to speak to you, ma'am," the woman said; and, as she waited for an answer, after a moment's hesitation, Norah turned away and went with her.

It was a girl who had come to ask for some help for her mother, who was ill. For ten minutes Norah was engaged with her, and then— Then she went into the dining-room, and stood over the fire, and said to herself, "Shall I go back to him?" but she could not make up her mind to go back.

"Let him come to me if he wants me," she said to herself. "I have waited all this time; I may wait a little longer still; if he wants me he will come."

So she sat down to her work again, and she waited—but he did not come.

There was a bell that always rang at half-past one for luncheon, but he often did not attend to its ringing. It rang to-day, but he paid no regard to it. After half-an-hour, almost unwillingly, she carried some biscuits to him.

"You had better have these, Roger," she said.

He merely answered, "Thank you," as if he was absorbed in what he was doing, and she put the *plate down,* and left him again.

It was a mild December day, with a little pale sunshine touching the winter landscape. She sat down at one of the windows, thinking that she would go out presently, but in her heart not wanting to go —in her heart wanting only to be ready for him when he should come to her.

For a long time no sound disturbed the silence in which she sat; then at last the study door opened, and her heart began to beat quickly; but her husband merely came out into the hall, and stood there for a few moments brushing his hat; and then she heard the house door close behind him.

"He might have come to me," she thought, with a little pang of disappointment; but he had not come, so she could only wait.

The sun set, and twilight came on, and it was almost dark when he returned. She had not meant to meet him on his return, but it chanced that just as he was turning the handle of the door (which opened from the outside without a key) she was coming downstairs, so they met without design.

"I suppose it is not cold?" she said, as she saw him.

"No, not at all," he replied. "It is very fine. You ought to have been out."

"I would have gone if you had asked me," she said, with a sudden impulse.

He looked up at her quickly, and she gave a little laugh.

"I had thought of going out, but I did not care to go alone."

"Would you rather have gone with me than alone?"

"Well,—I suppose I would."

She made the answer half reluctantly, half as if she were trying to speak in jest. He said nothing for a moment or two, and then asked—

"Will you come and sit for half an hour with me now?"

"If you like," she replied.

She went to the study with him. She had been there already in his absence, and had trimmed his fire, and drawn his curtains, and set his candles ready to be lighted on his table. He closed the door when they had entered, and looked round the room before he sat down.

"Is it you who have been doing all this?" he asked. "Closing the windows, and making up the fire, and all the rest of it?"

"Yes," she replied.

"You are wonderfully punctilious. You look well after the creature comforts, Norah."

"Sometimes that is all that one can do," she answered.

"No doubt. You have set my solitary chair, too, —to clinch the rest of your daily teaching."

"It was you who put your arm-chair there: I did not."

"Was it? I had forgotten. Well, you took care to let it stay, then. Where are you going to sit now?"

"Wherever you like."

"You wouldn't sit where I like. Choose your own seat." And then, when she had sat down a step or two from him—"I don't know what you have been doing all day?" he said abruptly.

"I have merely been sewing," she answered, "and reading."

"You did not care to bring either your work or your book here?"

"Yes," she said softly, "I cared."

"Why did you not do it, then?"

There was a moment's pause.

"Because—I was afraid——" She began to flush and hesitate. "I thought your mind would be too full of—of something else—for you to want me."

"I don't know what in the world——!"

He had got so far in his reply, with a look in his eyes of blank surprise, when suddenly what she meant flashed upon him, and he stopped. He sat silent for two or three moments; then—

"You were wrong, Norah," he said, in a changed tone.

She made no answer.

"Do you believe me, when I say you were wrong?" he repeated, in a louder voice.

"Yes," she replied, but the word seemed to come half reluctantly.

"That 'Yes' is little better than 'No.'"

"I beg your pardon. If you say I was wrong I believe you."

"You *may* believe me. I would stake a good deal that I have thought less of—of Mrs. Elton to-day than you have."

"You may easily have done that—for *I* have been thinking of her nearly all day."

"That is what you do generally, I believe. That is what you have done on most days during the last six months."

And then there was another pause. He had spoken bitterly, and she made no answer to him. Neither of them spoke again till at last, in a weary, passionate way, he broke the silence.

"Norah, I am sick to death of all this! I don't know how you think that things are to go on between us—or what is to be the end of it. My *wife*"—and all at once, with a wistful yearning in

his face, he turned to her and held out his hand—"my wife, when are you coming back to me?"

She looked at him, and her lips quivered; but she seemed to have no words ready to say to him.

"Do you imagine we can always go on like this?" he asked, after a few moments, when she did not speak. "You sit there as if no word from my lips could move you, and I—through every hour of the day I am yearning for you!"

"That is a new cry," she said, suddenly, with a curious harshness in her voice (to hide the gladness in her heart, perhaps). "You wanted little of my love six months ago. Six months ago you threw it away from you."

"Six months ago I was a fool!" he passionately answered.

"Yes, it suits you to say so now—perhaps even you think so. But possibly six months ago *I* might have been a fool too."

"Because *you* loved me then, you mean?"

"No, not because I loved you, but because I gave you my love so lavishly that—I surfeited you with it."

"Well, if you ever did that, you have let me starve since."

"You chose other food for yourself." She said this in a very low voice.

"I chose poison for myself, if you like."

"Food or poison, you preferred it to anything I could give you."

"Norah, if I committed a fault against you, have I not repented enough?"

"How can I answer that question? You have never told me that you have repented."

"Then I tell you now. I have repented *bitterly*."

"Well"—after a little pause,—"I am glad of that."

"Why are you glad of it? You would have cared, I know, once; but now—why does it make you glad, Norah? Your love for me is gone,—is it not?"

"Is it, do you think?"

"I think it must be. It must be dead, or it could not have so hidden itself all these weary months."

"Have you found these months weary, Roger?"

"Do you need to ask me if I have?"

"Well, no,—perhaps not, for we have both been sad enough, I know; but it was somebody else you missed, was it not?—not me?"

"It was no one else. I missed what you told me I threw away six months ago—what I want most now in all the world—nothing but that."

"Your poor wife's love, do you mean? What makes you want it back, Roger?"

"Do you think I can answer such a question?"

"It was so little to you once, you know. Even in the days when I was happiest I was only—only a little better to you than a common friend. Not that I blame you for that, you understand. I married you, knowing that the greatest love was on my side But now,—what am I to you?"

She rose up suddenly from her seat; all at once womanlike, she went to him,—the pale face flushed, —the parted lips trembling.

"What am I to you?" she said again, and stood still for a moment or two while he looked at her. And then all in an instant the light broke into her eyes; she went down on her knees beside his chair, and without another word, each seeking the other's by a common instinct, their four hands met and clasped.

So she had won him at last; but was he worth the winning? For my own part I do not think he was. He was a common-place man—perhaps even less than commonplace; of intellect possessing a good share, but of no moral quality, I fear, pos-

sessing a portion above the average. She was larger natured by a great deal—truer and stronger—than he was. But her life had been so ordered that his love had come to be to her the supreme thing that she desired. He might be poor and insignificant and unheroic in all other eyes but hers; in hers he was the one amongst God's creatures whom she longed to serve, whom she wanted to belong to, without whom she did not know how to live. And so, when she had thus at last won him, it seemed to her—rightly or wrongly—that she had won the best and most priceless thing in all the world; and I leave her happy, believing that no other woman's lot was so blest as hers.

END OF VOL. I.

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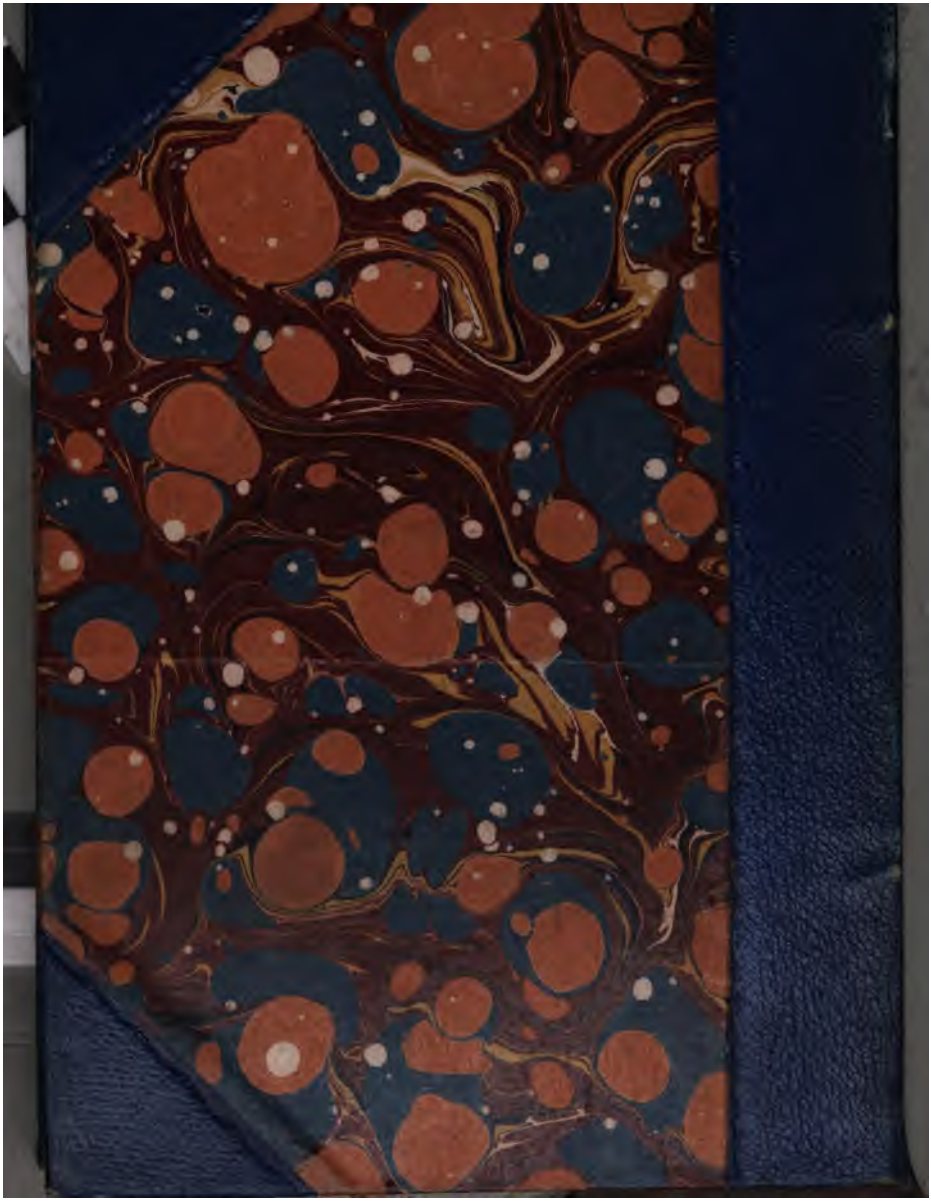
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